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Julia Schwanholz · Todd Graham  
Peter-Tobias Stoll *Editors*

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# Managing Democracy in the Digital Age

Internet Regulation, Social Media Use,  
and Online Civic Engagement

 Springer

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Julia Schwanholz • Todd Graham  
Peter-Tobias Stoll  
Editors

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Internet Regulation, Social Media Use,  
and Online Civic Engagement

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## Book Abstract

Over the past decades, the Internet has become omnipresent. With the rise of smartphones and “Internet of things” (Internet-enabled devices), the use of the Internet will become more and more embedded in our everyday life. This digital transformation has created new challenges and opportunities for politicians, journalists, political institutions, and the media to reconnect and engage with citizens. Within the context of Western democracies and China, the chapters in this volume investigate these challenges/opportunities from one of three angles: the regulatory state, the political use of social media, or through the lens of the public sphere. Drawing from different academic fields—political science, communication science, and journalism studies—the chapters raise a number of innovative research questions and provide some fascinating theoretical and empirical insight into the topic of digital transformation.

# Acknowledgement

Yet another book collection on digitalization? Yes, and how! We—the editors of the *Springer* book—are delighted and grateful to be part of the *U4 Network* formed by the four traditional Universities of Ghent, Goettingen, Groningen, and Uppsala. Through the support of the *U4 Social Science, Economics and Law* cluster, we have been (and still are) able to share our common interests on digital transformations and their impact on politics, policy, and democracy more broadly. The U4 Network has helped us establish ongoing cooperation in these areas of research. We would like to thank our U4 international coordinators, Marco Lange (Goettingen) and Jodien Howers (Groningen), for all their support from day one. Thanks to a few visiting research exchanges between Groningen and Goettingen by the editors, a conference in Groningen, and a lot of hard work, we proudly present a collection of chapters that reflect our joint efforts and are based on papers presented at the U4 General Conference in Groningen in November 2015. It has been a real pleasure.

The collection contains 14 enriching and insightful chapters that touch upon key (theoretical, methodological, and/or empirical) issues in light of the recent rise of digital media in Western democracies. The book is divided into three parts, which focus on key trends in policy and regulation, political communication, and (forms of) civic engagement—all within the context of digitization. The volume brings together a number of scholars and perspectives from the fields of political science, political communication, and journalism studies. We like to thank the authors for their contributions and all their hard work. It has been a real pleasure working/collaborating with all of you. Finally, we like to thank Johannes Glaeser from *Springer International* for his encouragement and assistance in publishing this volume and also Luisa Zabel from the University of Goettingen for her valuable assistance in formatting the manuscripts.

May 2017

Julia Schwanholz  
Todd Graham  
Peter-Tobias Stoll

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# Chapter 1

## Digital Transformation: New Opportunities and Challenges for Democracy?

Julia Schwanholz and Todd Graham

Over the past couple of decades, the Internet has become an essential part of everyday life for the majority of citizens in Western democracies. With the rise of smartphones and “Internet of things” (Internet-enabled devices), the use of the Internet will become even more embedded in the way we live our lives as citizens, families, communities, and societies as we move forward in the twenty-first century. Today, the Internet (along with the rise of digital media) is impacting everything from the way we shop, read the news, and live our everyday lives to the ways in which businesses, parliaments, and governments work, thus altering the fabric of social, political, and economic institutions. These digital transformations have created new challenges and opportunities for politicians, journalists, political institutions, and the (legacy) media from Internet regulation to reconnecting and engaging with citizens and audiences.

The contributions in this volume investigate these (new) challenges and opportunities facing Western democracies (and China) from one of three angles: the regulatory state, the political use of social media, or online civic engagement in the public sphere. Drawing from different academic fields (political science, communication science, and journalism studies), the chapters raise a number of innovative research questions and provide some fascinating theoretical and empirical insight. Yet, individual contributions can only contribute limited answers to the complex phenomenon of digitization. In this respect, the edited volume is greater than the sum of its parts. Rather, they collectively address three overarching research questions:

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RQ1: How do nation states, politicians, journalists, and citizens manage the Internet (and new digital media)?

RQ2: What (direct or indirect) impacts are digital media (including the Internet) having on (the relations between) politicians/political institutions, mass media/journalists, and citizens/voters/audiences in representative democracies?

RQ3: What effects are social media (and new media technologies more broadly) having on civic engagement in the public sphere in democratic and nondemocratic states?

The volume also contributes to the ongoing, multidimensional, and broad discourses on (a) the disruptive character of the Internet versus the reign and prolongation of old media; (b) the potential of new digital media for (re-)politicization versus the withdrawal to virtual parallel worlds; and (c) the integrative effects of social networks versus separation effects by the dichotomy of online-natives and offline-left-behinds. Depending on the individual background of the author, the reader finds chapters written by political scientists, sociologists, political communication experts, and journalism scholars, which draw from an array of theoretical concepts and methodological approaches.

To answer the research questions stated above, the collection is structured into three parts. Drawing from political science, Part I—titled *Challenges for Internet Regulation on the Global, EU, and National Level*—deals with political regulation of the digital transformation. Political regulation is not only the enforcement of the law by executive and administrative bureaucracy. Rather, for regulatory politics, some expert knowledge and specific information are needed to match the most situative developments in the very different policy fields. Policy regulation means to balance the tension of change and stability co-occurring in regulatory policy fields over time. To give structure to the wide range of regulation, it makes sense to distinguish state regulation (by legislation) from self-regulation (by private actors) and co-regulation (by public *and* private actors, the so-called regulated self-regulation). The three contributions in Part I provide some worth reading examples of political regulation. They analyze various policy issues (Internet censorship, European Data Protection, and German Copyright) with some interesting insights into certain constellations of conflict.

In the contribution by Andreas Busch, Patrick Theiner, and Yana Breindl, the authors investigate Internet censorship across 21 liberal democratic states. They start with making a strict distinction between democracies (without Internet censorship) and autocracies (with censorships of Internet content). Doubting that the hypothesis of *good* liberal democracies and *bad* Internet-blocking autocracies holds over time, they investigated whether democracies do, in fact, act similarly to autocracies when it comes to online content regulation (and if so, in which way). Interested in potentially problematic content (e.g., child porn, gambling, copyright), they show that liberal democracies seemingly follow autocracies in blocking access to web pages. On the other hand—and this is an interesting finding—the authors clearly distinguish autocracies from liberal democracies by identifying several types of regulatory features (from self-regulation without state interference to

tight control via formal legislation). And although the pressures to deal with the problems related to the Internet as a global phenomenon are similar in all observed countries, the authors claim that they result in different regulatory approaches of varying intensity. This leads to a political landscape that reflects individual solutions of common, general problems among the country cases. The chapter provides some new empirical data with some interesting democratic-theoretical insight.

Since Internet blocking is famous due to the contestation of its effects, other regulatory issues remain rather unrecognized. One example of this is examined in the contribution by Stefan Lindow who asks how it can be explained that the sector of copyright—which is by policy example already mentioned in Busch’s et al. piece—central to the digital revolution appears negligible to Internet policy. He, therefore, investigates the history of German Copyright Regulation (*Urheberrecht*) and is primarily interested in the question of whether one can find an Internet policy subsystem that fits *Urheberrecht* politics. Policy subsystems can be described as the aggregation of all state and non-state actors (even institutions) that affect a policy area or sector. Lindow’s findings suggest that the more complex a specific policy is the more difficult it is to subsume it into a subsystem. This empirical observation, for the example of German Copyright, becomes even more important in light of a still underdeveloped theoretical framework. Lindow’s conclusion, therefore, can be read as a plea for more theory (re-)constructive research.

In the final contribution of Part I, Murat Karaboga offers a comprehensive state-of-the-art investigation into EU data protection. The policy of data protection generally gains much more public interest than copyright issues do. Nevertheless, the author reports on poor research results. Political science scholars seem to struggle in contributing theoretical and empirical fruitful policy field analyses. He shows the eventful history of European data protection over some decades. Demonstrating the ongoing importance of the data protection policy for the political agenda, Karaboga calls for further research in this area.

In Part II—titled *Political Communication and Social Media: From Politics to Citizens*—the volume takes a closer look at the top-down logic of political communication in the digital age by investigating how parliaments, a parliamentary committee, politicians, and political news reporters from various European states (Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom) are using social media (and the Internet more broadly). One of the challenges facing Western democracies is the growing democratic deficit, i.e., citizens seem to be withdrawing from traditional forms of political participation, growing distrustful of both media and political institutions, and are increasingly indifferent and cynical about politics. In light of these trends, the contributions in this section examine how, and to what extent, parliaments, politicians, and political journalists are tapping into the interactive, participatory, and public nature of social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. Are such platforms being used to foster a more “direct” (reciprocal, interactive, engaging, and accountable) relationship between politicians/parliaments and citizens? Are social media opening up political news reporting to alternative, non-elite news sources?

In the contribution by Patrick Theiner, Julia Schwanholz, and Andreas Busch, the authors evaluate the extent to which national parliaments' websites from 28 European states are adopting different communication tools. When asking how first chambers of EU member states use the Internet and digital media tools to connect with citizens, the authors find distinct efforts to join social network communities. Although they cannot draw a clear landscape of winners and losers, the results do show a differentiated map of over- and underachievers who do not fit typical explanatory factors like country specific scores for Internet- and social media participation.

While the focus lies on institutional websites in the previous contribution, analyses in the following three chapters concentrate on individual MPs' social media use. In their contribution, Julia Schwanholz, Brenda Moon, Axel Bruns, and Felix Victor Muench take a closer look at the New Digital Agenda Parliamentary Committee in the German Bundestag by examining committee members' social media activities. Asking whether the new committee attracts a broader audience by using social media tools, the results made for sobering reading. It is "much ado about nothing" as stated in the title of their chapter. Neither committee members nor the digital committee itself (e.g., with an institutional account) uses Twitter to inform the public about their (legislative) performances, rather it is used by MPs for self-management reasons and constituency-related storytelling. In line with the previous contribution, the German Bundestag provides another poor example of social media use for interactive, participatory purposes. MPs, along with the institutional assembly, seem to be behind the curve regarding recent digital and social network developments when compared to other national parliaments in the European Union.

Moving on to election campaigns, in the contribution by Pieter Verdegem and Evelien D'heer, the authors investigate the relevance of Twitter and Facebook during the 2014 Belgium federal election. In the context of debates around media logic and the rise of social media logic, the authors question the extent to which social media alter politicians' dependency on mainstream media and/or generate new dependencies. Their mixed method approach reveals that Flemish politicians demonstrate a fusion of old and new logics in the contemporary media environment. The case study serves as an important counter-example to other more often studied EU countries, such as Germany. The authors can show existential differences between both logics (social media and "old" media), and at the end, they call for more exploratory research to better explain their findings.

One of the more talked about characteristics of (social) media logic has been personalization: the belief that news coverage has shifted from parties and ideologies to individual politicians and their personal qualities and lives. In their contribution, Todd Graham, Dan Jackson, and Marcel Broersma take a closer look at the concept of personalization by examining how British and Dutch politicians (during an election campaign) are using Twitter to disclose/share information about their private lives or personal interests/experiences. The authors develop an insightful typology of tweeting behavior in relation to personalization and show, for example,

how personalized tweeting behavior on Twitter can potentially strengthen the relation with voters by creating a sense of closeness with followers.

In the final contribution of Part II, we shift focus from politicians to political journalists, the other group of political communication elites that create and disseminate political messages for mass consumption (often in competition with politicians and political institutions). Twitter has become one of the most popular social media platforms for political reporters (and politicians), raising questions over its impact on journalism practice, especially journalist-source relations. In the contribution by Bert Jan Brands, Todd Graham, and Marcel Broersma, the authors investigate how Dutch reporters are using Twitter as a source for political news coverage. Their findings show that Twitter has become a regularly used source for political news reporting, thus contributing to the agenda-building process—the process by which news organizations and journalists determine what to cover. They conclude, that rather than opening up political news coverage to a diversity of (non-elite) sources, Twitter, as a news source, is reinforcing political elites' stranglehold over the agenda-setting process.

Whereas in Part II the contributions focused on political communication elites' use of social media (top-down communication), Part III—titled *Online Civic Engagement and the Public Sphere*—examines the use of the Internet and new media technologies from a bottom-up perspective, i.e., how citizens/audiences are using such technologies in light of the public sphere. Over the past several decades, much has been made of the potential of the Internet for reinvigorating political debate, engagement, and participation in the public sphere. More recently, debates have emerged regarding new forms of participation and engagement afforded by social media platforms. With an increasing emphasis on interactive, citizen-led, bottom-up communication and participation, there is a need for new thinking on how the relationship between political actors/institutions and journalists/media organizations on the one hand, and citizens/audiences on the other should function. In this context, citizens are no longer viewed as passive receivers of political information, but rather they are viewed as actively engaging in political processes (both formal and informal), thus altering the traditional relationship between politicians, journalists, and citizens. The contributions in Part III begin to explore these new relations by investigating how citizens are engaging in everyday online spaces/online communities in light of the public sphere; whether and how such spaces/communities are cultivating and fostering civic engagement; and how citizens are using new media technologies to engage with the news and news organizations for civic purposes.

For years, legacy media in Western democracies have acted as social glue, binding people, communities, and the nation together. Reading the morning newspaper over breakfast or watching the evening news are just some of the ways citizens stay informed and develop shared frames of reference, which enable them to participate in public life. However, in the digital age, where there are an increasing number of news platforms and tools and devices to access news itself, the ways in which people experience and connect to the news (to the public) are changing. In their contribution, Joëlle Swart, Chris Peters, and Marcel Broersma

take a look at such changes by exploring how news media today are being used for the purpose of public connection and whether digital media foster new patterns of news consumption for connecting to public life. More specifically, through the use of semi-structured interviews and the Q-methodology with Dutch news users, the authors investigate the changing rituals of news use/consumption (brought on by digitization) for navigating everyday life. Their findings suggest that with the increasing pervasiveness of news through a growing number of online platforms (and mobile devices), people seem to be “connected” more than ever before. However, public connection through news does not necessarily mean public connection through journalism (i.e., the legacy media). Overall, their findings suggest a “re-ritualization” of public connection whereby old and new media interact.

Another issue facing legacy media today is one of trust. In many Western democracies, there has been a growing feeling of distrust in mainstream news media by the public, which has partly been fueled by the by-products of (the rise of) social media such as fake news, trolling, and polarization and increasing attacks on the trustworthiness of legacy media by political elites and politicians (think, for example, of Trump’s recent attacks on the American media). In his contribution, Göran Svensson takes a closer look at media criticism, journalism hate, and trust in the media more broadly by investigating and analyzing what happens when a journalist sincerely attempts to engage with citizens on an online platform (*Flash-back*) dedicated to media criticism with the intentions of listening to and trying to understand public criticism (in hopes of building trust). The analysis—which was based on a qualitative textual analysis of a discussion thread geared towards understanding the intentions of the participants, the objects of critique, and the process of the discussion itself—shows how such a platform can be used constructively to increase understanding and help overcome polarization. The findings presented by Svensson show how journalists and media organizations can engage with media criticism in productive and beneficial ways online that help foster reciprocity and (mutual) trust.

Some of the earliest studies of politics and the Internet were those which investigated and explored how people talked/discussed politics online. Indeed, there has been much said about the potential of the Internet in opening up spaces for public debate, thus extending and (hopefully) enhancing the public sphere. Over the past two decades, we have seen the field of “online deliberation” blossom, offering a growing number of theoretical and empirical insights into the (different) ways people engage in political talk online and what this means for the (health and state of the) public sphere. Building on this body of research, the final two contributions of this volume investigate everyday online political talk from two understudied perspectives. First, Jakob Svensson examines the role “lurkers”—someone who uses an online discussion forum but does not post comments to it—play in political talk in a Swedish, LGBTQ, online community called *Qruiser*. The chapter not only provides interesting insights into how people talk politics in everyday lifestyle communities, it also develops an innovative conceptual framework on the role of lurking in public debates. Instead of focusing on actual lurkers, Svensson conceptualizes lurkers as “an imagined audience willing to listen and be



persuaded by active participants' arguments." In other words, the focus is placed on the impact of the perception of lurking on meaning-making processes of active participants engaging in online political talk. Based on netnographic research design (a pioneering form of ethnography adapted for studying online communities), his findings reveal that active participants were not (necessarily) engaging in rational-critical debate online to convince their active opponents, but rather they were addressing and trying to convince an imagined audience of undecided lurkers. Participants here were driven by the enjoyment of the "fantasy of persuasion," the possibility of persuading lurkers to adopt their views, thus creating "a politically harmonious society."

In the final contribution, we take a step away from Western democracies and explore how the Internet is impacting the Chinese public sphere, a country with close to 700 million Internet users. Yu Sun, Todd Graham, and Marcel Broersma investigate how Chinese citizens engage in political talk about environmental issues—some of the most pressing problems facing China today—in the online "green public sphere." Much of the current scholarship on the Chinese green public sphere focuses primarily on specific environmental events/movements with environmental NGOs as the central public. The authors, however, explore the green public sphere from the perspective of everyday Chinese citizens through the way they talk about such issues in three popular discussion forums (online communities). One of the original and revealing aspects of their study is that they move beyond political-based forums (those communities dedicated to talking politics) by examining online political talk in popular spaces dedicated to lifestyle issues (such as parenting and childcare) and comparing it to political talk that emerges in online spaces dedicated to (formal) politics. Their findings reveal that Chinese citizens are using such spaces online to voice their opinions and concerns on environmental issues. However, political debate in the Habermasian sense—in-depth, rational-critical debate—among Chinese netizens was infrequent. Rather, average citizens tended to engage in environmental politics through other civic ways, for instance, by voicing political contention (challenging authorities) through complaining and the expression of anger about environmental degradation and the government's ineffective environmental policies. Such talk did not confront the state directly but was expressed through the sharing of personal experiences and stories, fostering a sense of community and opening up new ways of being political in the Chinese green public sphere.

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**Part I**  
**Challenges for Internet Regulation on the**  
**Global, EU, and National Level**

## Chapter 2

# Internet Censorship in Liberal Democracies: Learning from Autocracies?

Andreas Busch, Patrick Theiner, and Yana Breindl

### Introduction

The expansion and increased use of the Internet has profoundly changed the lives of many during the last two decades. This is most apparent in social life, where (especially for the younger generation) *social networks* play a central role in communication. The Internet also has high commercial relevance: consumers increasingly do their shopping online, at home with their computers, or on the go with their smartphones, much to the chagrin of established companies such as booksellers. Whether the widespread use of the Internet also forces politics to change, and if so, how, is still being debated in public and the sciences.<sup>1</sup>

What can be said with certainty is that politics has taken notice of the Internet's importance. At least since Barack Obama's energetic 2008 presidential election campaign, it seems clear that to be successful as a political actor, means to be *online*. All parties, most politicians, and even many political institutions present their positions on more or less sophisticated and updated online platforms; additionally, they share their viewpoints on current political events to an increasing degree via *social media* such as Twitter or Facebook (Schwanholz and Busch 2016).

Besides its use as a medium of image cultivation for political actors, the Internet also has the potential to improve democracy itself through expanded avenues of political participation (Margetts 2013). Early observers already saw the possibilities of technical solutions for democratic progress. More than a quarter century ago, democratic theorist Robert A. Dahl postulated that

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<sup>1</sup>For an overview, see Farrell (2012) or Dutton (2013).

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telecommunications could reduce the information gap between experts and citizens, which would lead to discussions with much broader participation (Dahl 1989, 339). Through decreasing transactions costs of acquiring information, easier ways to express one's own opinion to a broader audience, and simpler organization of political manifestations, the Internet could transform "an onlooker's democracy into a participation democracy" (Leggewie and Maar 1998). It was hoped that the well-known problems of party oligarchization could at least be mitigated, and political decisions could be taken faster and more directly through online communications (Siedschlag et al. 2002). Optimists even saw "organizations without organization" arise—new forms of collective action through mass mobilization, with the potential to change the world (Shirky 2008). Case studies about the central role that information and communication technology (ICT) played for social movements and political campaigns, such as those in Myanmar or the Philippines, or the protest networks advocating against the WTO, soon gave empirical credence to the relevance of these theoretical assumptions (Downing and Brooten 2007).

It is not surprising that states ruled by autocrats and dictators were highly skeptical towards the Internet as a medium from an early stage, fearing its emancipatory potential. They mostly reacted by restricting Internet access—in a physical sense (made easier by the fact that many of these states suffer from low economic development, which makes access costly), but also beyond: authorities succeeded in exercising control over content even where physical access was given. For the most part, such content control was accomplished through sophisticated filtering techniques, which precluded users from acquiring information from sources that authorities objected to.

Bringing such state interventions to light and documenting them is the chief goal of the "OpenNet Initiative" (ONI), a collaboration between researchers at the universities of Toronto (Citizen Lab at the Munk Centre for International Studies), Harvard (Berkman Center for Internet & Society), and Cambridge (Advanced Network Research Group).<sup>2</sup> The group's researchers have been collecting empirical data on Internet censorship since 2001 and have conducted systematic empirical tests on a first set of 40 countries since 2006. They found a wealth of evidence for Internet censorship through filters blocking access to certain websites.<sup>3</sup> State interference was strongest in specific regions, namely East Asia, the Middle East and North Africa, and Central Asia. Several former Soviet Union states also showed Internet filtering being employed (Deibert et al. 2008, 41). Access blocks were employed for websites featuring pornographic or "immoral" content, but often also for those with politically undesirable material. Filtering technology became more sophisticated over time: Early on, simple blocking pages were employed, while later advances gave states access control in real time, making it possible to

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<sup>2</sup>More about the OpenNet Initiative and the results of its research can be found at [opennet.net](http://opennet.net). On the history of ONI, see [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/OpenNet\\_Initiative](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/OpenNet_Initiative) (last accessed Dec 13, 2016).

<sup>3</sup>See Deibert et al. (2008) or Zeidler (2005) for a German-language summary.

manipulate the availability of media content or opposition websites during election times, for example (Deibert et al. 2008, 42).

All results seemed to show that censorship of Internet content happened only under autocratic regimes. Where liberal democracies were investigated, ONI generally found “no evidence” for content filtering (OpenNet Initiative 2012). This pointed to a clear distinction between democracies and autocracies.

On these grounds, American foreign policy under the Obama administration looked to communication via the Internet as an avenue to foster democracy and freedom. In a programmatic speech on “Internet Freedom” in January 2010 in Washington, DC, Secretary of State Clinton took a strong stand against censorship: “We cannot stand by while people are separated from the human family by walls of censorship. And we cannot be silent about these issues simply because we cannot hear the cries” (Clinton 2010). To help those seeking to circumvent Internet filtering, the Department of State started a “Liberation Technology” Program in collaboration with Stanford University in 2009, which delivers know-how, software, and hardware to bypass censorship and make full use of electronic communication channels.<sup>4</sup>

But can we really uphold this initially plausible hypothesis of a strict distinction between democracies and autocracies when it comes to censorship and content regulation on the Internet—between “good,” hands-off democracies and “bad,” censorious autocracies?

Both general normative assumptions about democracies acting supportively towards the ideal of free speech, and the above-mentioned ONI data speak in favor of the assumption. However, several political episodes in recent years imply that democracies are not immune from the temptation of tampering with their citizen’s access to online content. Germany saw political conflicts erupt in 2009 about the “Zugangerschwerungsgesetz” (Access Impediment Act),<sup>5</sup> which was designed to prevent access to child pornography on the Internet. The initiative necessitated a complex blocking infrastructure and was to involve the Federal Criminal Police Office; the law encountered constitutional concerns raised by experts (Schnabel 2009) and significant political resistance (Busch 2010), which led to its subsequent repeal.<sup>6</sup> Other liberal democracies have had similar discussions about, and shown evidence of, state tampering with the informational structure of the Internet. As early as 2004, the United Kingdom introduced its so-called *Cleanfeed* system, which was supposed to impede access to child pornographic material through self-regulation (McIntyre 2013).

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<sup>4</sup>More information on the program at [liberationtechnology.stanford.edu](http://liberationtechnology.stanford.edu) (last accessed Dec 13, 2016). The text by Diamond (2010) can be seen as a programmatic manifesto of this approach.

<sup>5</sup>See Bundestag printed matter 16/13411, at [dip21.bundestag.de/dip21/btd/16/134/1613411.pdf](http://dip21.bundestag.de/dip21/btd/16/134/1613411.pdf) (last accessed: Dec 13, 2016).

<sup>6</sup>See Bundestag printed matter 17/6644, at [dipbt.bundestag.de/dip21/btd/17/066/1706644.pdf](http://dipbt.bundestag.de/dip21/btd/17/066/1706644.pdf) (last accessed: Dec 13, 2016).

Only comparative research can answer the question whether such episodes are isolated cases, or whether democracies do, in fact, act similarly to autocracies when it comes to online content regulation (and if so, in which way). This chapter builds on insights generated in a larger research project on “Net Blocking in Liberal Democracies”.<sup>7</sup> Its first part provides an empirical introduction to the topic by looking at Internet blocking in 21 liberal democracies. Next, we provide an analysis of factors influencing whether democracies erect access impediments, and point out some common driving forces and obstacles. Lastly, we discuss the results with a special view towards the topics of “embedded democracy” and “crisis of democracy” (Merkel 2015b).

## Internet Blocking in Liberal Democracies

At first glance, the Internet does not seem like a very good case study for questions about the influence of primarily national political variables on political outcomes. After all, did the Internet not already transcend the national level in its inception, and does it not severely limit executives’ capacities to regulate it? But a deeper look reveals that over time, governments have found a variety of ways to exert influence over the Internet.

What we today call the Internet was born without central planning or even intent during the 1960s in the United States, where state-funded research by the military and its *Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency* (DARPA) created a resource-rich environment that was fertile ground for innovative ideas, even those that did not immediately produce tangible results. The creators of the Internet, a small group of scientists and engineers who dominated its genesis in the 1970s and development until the early 1990s, were steeped in an avant-garde, libertarian culture deeply skeptical towards all state regulation (Busch 2016). This attitude—occasionally called “techno-utopian” (Hofmann 2012)—was reflected in the architecture of the Internet itself, which distributed data packets without a centralized controlling instance, and remained agnostic towards the content of these packets. This neutral routing along the shortest path was an engineering solution for the problem of packet distribution, and foresaw neither hierarchical control nor security measures against criminal intent.

An almost arrogant belief in the infeasibility of government regulation of this “global social space” was the pervasive sentiment during the Internet’s early years. It possibly found its most concise expression in the *Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*, penned in the mid-1990s by John Perry Barlow, one of the

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<sup>7</sup>The project was conducted between 2012 and 2015 in the research cluster *Digital Humanities* within the *Göttingen Center for Digital Humanities* (GCDH) at the University of Göttingen. A deeper analysis of some points touched upon in this chapter can be found in Breindl et al. (2015); more about the project at [www.gcdh.de/en/projects/tp2-ins/politics/](http://www.gcdh.de/en/projects/tp2-ins/politics/) (last accessed: Dec 13, 2016).

founders of the *Electronic Frontier Foundation* (EFF). National governments, writes Barlow, those “weary giants of flesh and steel,” had no sovereignty over *cyberspace*, and could not exert any real pressure to enforce their rules (Barlow 1996). A similarly optimistic assessment came from John Gilmore, another EFF activist, who asserted that “the Net interprets censorship as damage and routes around it” (Elmer-Dewitt 1993, 63).

Yet in parallel with the Internet’s rapidly increasing number of users in the late 1990s, and its new economic importance, the political and social relevance of this new communication medium became ever more apparent. Tensions grew between the decentralized, anti-authoritarian structure of the Internet on the one side, and the necessarily territorial, nationally organized systems to regulate it on the other. In the end, the conflict was resolved mostly in favor of the latter: national laws and regulations, organized by governments, were extended from their physical place of applicability into cyberspace. This was possible because the Internet had never been truly virtual; its technical infrastructure—its fibers, wires, routers, and servers—were located on state territory and thus also subject to rule enforcement by nation states.<sup>8</sup>

The more widespread the debate about enforcing existing legal standards on the Internet became (often combined with the rhetorical figure that the Internet could not be allowed to be an “extralegal sphere”), the more it became possible to assert political preferences. States reserved the right to unilateral content regulation—without coordination since they had strongly divergent preferences about *which* content to regulate and *how* (Drezner 2004, 2007, 95–101). The following section shows in how far liberal democracies actually used this right and which factors advanced or hindered the implementation of content regulation. We first present the empirical picture, before analyzing driving forces and obstacles.

## ***The Empirical Picture***

Firstly, we must ask in what way liberal democracies regulate Internet content. The following findings are based on the research project mentioned above, and the data it collected: Internet content regulation in 21 liberal democracies from 2004 to 2012.<sup>9</sup> Before this chapter presents results and developments based on this rich data source, we develop a typology content regulation approaches. Not only will this

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<sup>8</sup>Whether internet pioneers and enthusiasts had truly overlooked this fact, or whether their attitudes were so deeply shaped by the idea of freedom of speech that they did not deem it significant, would surely merit its own study.

<sup>9</sup>The project collected and analyzed official documents and law digests, among other sources. Further information about the 33 regulation systems that the study is based on can be found in Annex A1 of Breindl et al. (2015). The cases are focused on regulatory systems with universal prevalence for internet access in a country. Individual cases of access restrictions are not considered, such as those imposed by court orders, or the practices of individual companies (such as

differentiation allow a more systematic evaluation of the empirical landscape, but also link the findings to the more general literature on regulative politics (Levi-Faur 2011). Three broad types of content regulation can be distinguished:

- *Self-regulation*—regulation by private actors without direct involvement of state actors. Examples include industry standards and codes of conduct on content filtering, typically initiated and coordinated by industry associations.
- *Co-regulation*—often called “regulated self-regulation”; regulation through cooperation of private and public actors, e.g., situations combining goals set by the public side with private-side implementation.<sup>10</sup>
- And lastly *legal regulation*, where rule-making is provided by the state as the sole responsible party.

The distinction drawn here is thus based on variation in the sources of regulation, or the extent of the involvement of the public side.

The main finding from overlaying this typology on the empirical data of the 21 states during the given period is a strong upswing in the prevalence and extent of Internet content regulation. We observe barely any systems of regulation at all in 2004, while less than a decade later the opposite is true: in 2012, there is practically no state that does not regulate Internet content in some form or another. As shown in Fig. 2.1, this trend is also reflected in an increase of all types of content regulation—all three forms show roughly linear increases during the first half of the study’s time frame. Beginning in 2008, further increases in regulation levels are chiefly due to a greater number of legal, state-led instruments being employed. Thus, both private and public actors are responsible for the rise of Internet content regulation in liberal democracies.

But what are the reasons for this rise? Is it a product of a uniform increase across all countries, or do only some liberal democracies drive this development, while others resist it? As Fig. 2.2 shows, content regulation is a broad trend with a similarly broad base in the included liberal democracies. While there are two clear frontrunners (Denmark and France with four regulatory systems) and two laggards without regulation in place (Austria and Iceland), the clear majority of states (17 of 21) lies between these extremes and has introduced one or two Internet content regulation systems. States also employ all different regulation types of self-regulation, co-regulation, and legal regulation. Most countries with more than one regulatory system also internally mix these approaches—exceptions from the rule are only France and Italy (only legal regulation), and the United States (only self-regulation).

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Google or Facebook). Such cases are not the product of state intervention, and are thus much less problematic from a political and normative viewpoint than the cases discussed here.

<sup>10</sup>The relationship between both components can vary greatly in this case; it ranges from cooperation on equal footing between the actors at one end of the spectrum to the private side acting under the “shadow of hierarchy” at the other. However, such differences are of secondary importance for this study.



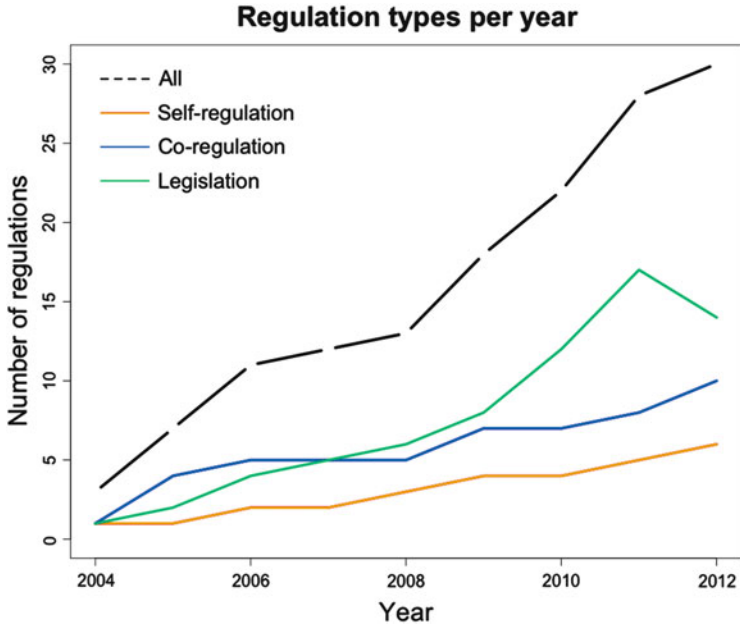


Fig. 2.1 Internet content regulation, total and by type, 2004 to 2012

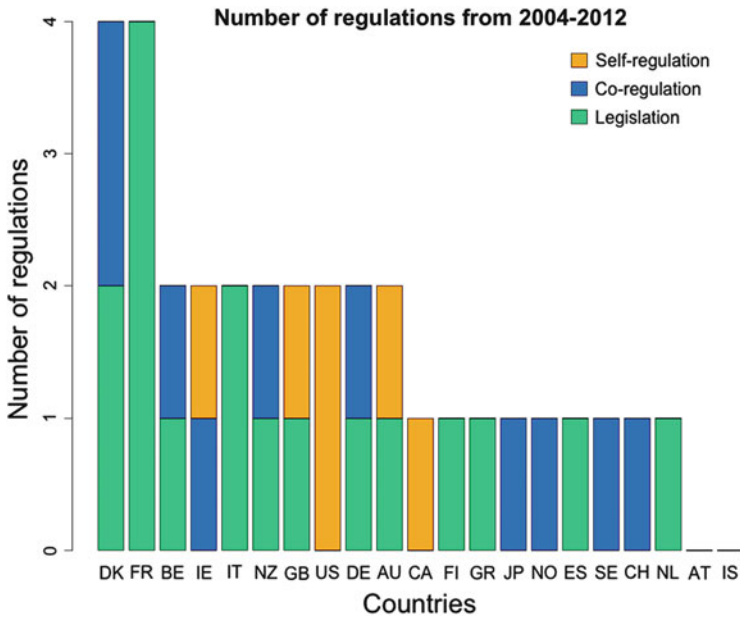
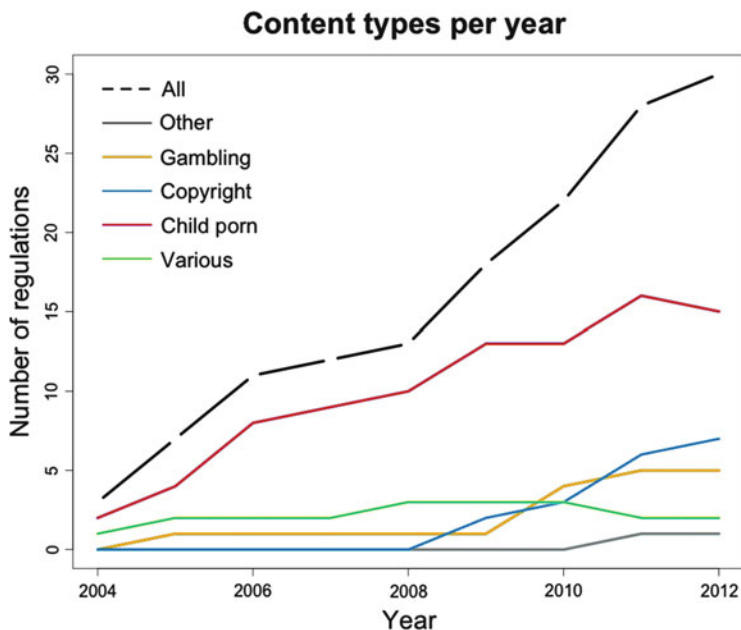


Fig. 2.2 Regulatory measures by country and type, 2004 to 2012



**Fig. 2.3** Regulatory measures by issue area, 2004 to 2012

Despite this variation, one thing is clear: after its rapid and widespread adoption, Internet content regulation has become a common phenomenon in liberal democracies.

Next, we look at which types of potentially problematic content are being regulated. Figure 2.3 shows that the increase in regulation was mainly driven by the topic of child pornographic material between 2004 and 2009.<sup>11</sup> Practically, all countries that did in fact introduce content regulation at all also regulated against such material; only Greece and Spain are exceptions. Rules targeting child pornography thus constitute a “baseline” of content regulation. The introduction of these rules faced its share of criticism: commentators argued that once the systems were in place (especially in terms in technical infrastructure), there was little to stop their misuse to block other forms of content by political or state actors—a “thin end of the wedge” or “mission creep” argument. Figure 2.3 does nothing to dispel this critique: regulations in other areas (such as gambling or copyright) seem to increase in number only *after* child pornography has been access restricted. Similarly, Fig. 2.4 shows that the greater the number of regulations in a country, the more issue areas are being regulated. Further research is needed as to whether the same infrastructure is indeed used for this. However, it could be assumed that different

<sup>11</sup>The term “child pornographic material” is employed here because of its widespread use. However, the term is not entirely accurate in capturing the problem, which would better be described as a form of child abuse that is organized and documented through media.

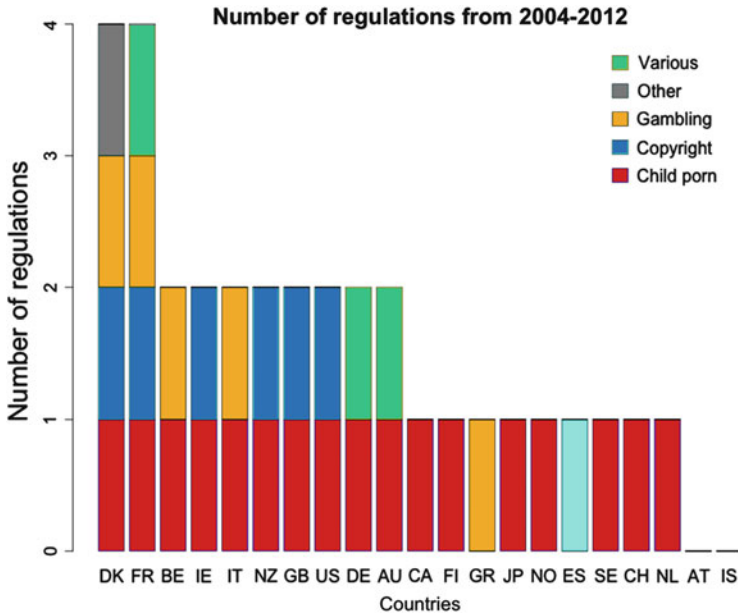


Fig. 2.4 Number and type of regulatory measures by country, 2004 to 2012

regulatory types (legal, co-regulation, self-regulation) also require different infrastructure implementation, which would imply the opposite effect.

As a last piece of the empirical picture of content regulation in liberal democracies, we examine the connection between substantive issue areas and types of regulation. Here, it is especially interesting to see whether there is a correlation between particular regulatory regimes being used more often to tackle specific issues. Looking at Fig. 2.5, no definitive answer presents itself: instead of generalizable insights, we see significant variation. As an example, gambling is regulated through legal means in all five countries that restrict its accessibility (see also Fig. 2.4). In contrast, combating child pornographic material is attempted through all three forms of regulatory schemes. The same is true in the case of copyright protection/piracy prevention, even though self-regulation and legal regulation clearly outnumber co-regulatory efforts. Taken together, there does not seem to be an overarching trend where each issue area has its own type of regulation.

As this—necessarily brief—exploration of characteristics of the data set has shown, liberal democracies have utilized Internet content regulation to a significant degree during the period under observation. Where there were only four regulatory schemes in 2004, by 2012 this number had risen to 33. In addition, this increase was evenly distributed (save for two of the 21 countries) and a product of a variety of regulatory regimes and instruments involving public and private actors. However, in nearly all countries the fight against child pornography seemed to be an important driver and catalyst for the introduction of further regulation, even though the

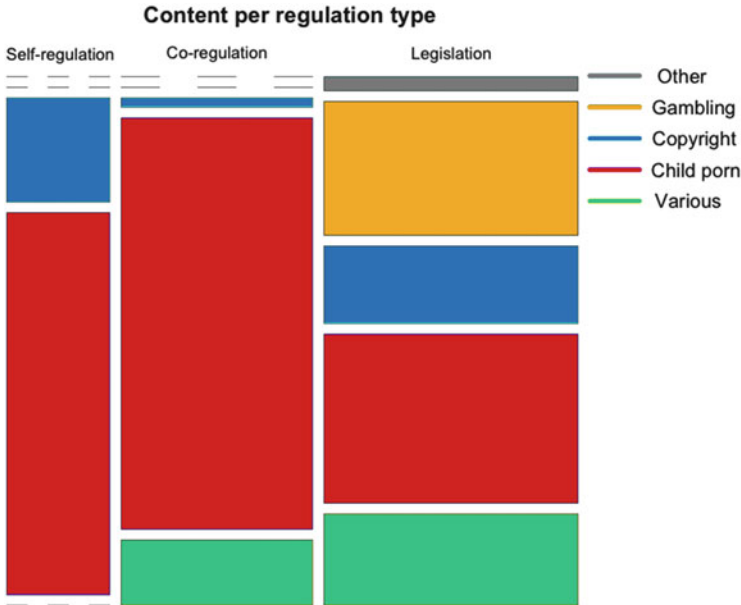


Fig. 2.5 Regulation type and content type

instruments employed to control access vary across cases. This contrasts with the issue of gambling, for example, where states exclusively use legal regulation.

While content type and regulatory instruments did not show a clear correlation, it is possible to discern some patterns when it comes to the relationship between political variables and the introduction and shape of Internet content regulation, which is especially interesting from a political science perspective. For a start, there are similarities within regions: English-speaking countries (North America, Great Britain, Ireland) seem to prefer the instrument of self-regulation, while the overwhelming majority of EU members and states in Oceania are more likely to choose the two other regulatory regimes (co-regulation and legal regulation). Whether these patterns are really the product of the systematic influence of institutional and political variables will be examined in the following section.

### ***Analytical Framework: Driving Forces and Obstacles***

After giving a primarily descriptive overview of the regulation of Internet content in liberal democracies, we now turn our attention to the question which institutional and political factors can explain the extent and variation of this regulation. The significant *variation in regulatory behavior* described above is especially in need of an explanation because of the *commonality of problems* (primarily caused by the increase in Internet communication).

Several variables related to a state's system of government could potentially help explain this variation. Based on the above-mentioned approach of *comparative public policy research*, such variables include the ideological orientation of the governing party or parties, the structure (and thus, influence) of interest group participation and representation, the existence of elements of federalism (which might impede political changes), or the extent of constitutional judicial review. Also relevant could be the differences between *majoritarian* (or *Westminster*) *democracies* and *consensus democracies* (Lijphart 2012).

Which effects would we expect these variables to have when it comes to introducing Internet content regulation? Which values of the variables could act as driving forces of regulation, and which ones as obstacles? The following sections will investigate these questions and report the results of a quantitative test using regression models.

The party difference hypothesis postulates that variations in policy results are due to the “color” or ideological direction of the governing party or—in the case of coalitions—parties. It is not immediately obvious whether the issue area of content blocking is subject to the traditional difference between “left” and “conservative” or “right” parties, and their often-competing approaches to regulation. Previous research has often made the point that Internet policy and politics do not adhere to the classical left-right spectrum (Breindl and Briatte 2013). This is especially true for the issue of content regulation when it is interpreted as a topic of personal freedom, for which both supportive and opposed viewpoints can be found on the left *and* right. Support for blocking could be justified with the goal of security (from the left with an affirmation for state intervention in principle; from the right with a preference for law and order). On the other hand, rejecting blocking could be cast in the light of a preference for free access to any kind of information by the left; while the right could base this in a healthy skepticism towards state intrusion into the affairs of its citizens. The exact impact of parties' ideological direction is not clearly determined—there might possibly be a consistent effect of the “color” of governing parties, but this is likely to be highly dependent on the context of national discussions about Internet blocking.

Regarding the effect of interest groups, the expectations are clearer. Based on the research discourse on pluralism and corporatism, we expect collective interests to be especially successful at interfacing with corporatist political systems (meaning those with a hierarchical structure and strong unions) since such systems have developed the requisite “receptors” to integrate collective interests into the political and legislative process (often in the form of early consultations). We thus hypothesize that corporatist systems will show greater influence of collective interest groups, such as unions, on decisions about regulating online content. However, it is unclear if this influence translates into opposition or support of regulation. If it is chiefly exerted by those who expect to benefit from the introduction of regulatory schemes (such as certain IT companies), the influence can be expected to act positively on regulation; where those in opposition to blocking are dominant (such as civil rights advocates), it can impede it.

Regarding states' territorial structure, we would expect changes from the *status quo* (in this case, the introduction of content blocking) to be easier in states with a unitary system, rather than a federal one. The reason for this is a higher consensus threshold which must be overcome in the latter. Additionally, there could be competition and uncertainty between the federal and federated levels about who possesses the competence to initiate and introduce regulation. A fragmentation or even blockage of the regulatory response thus seems likely. The hypothesis has a caveat: it applies mainly to the area of *legal regulation*. It seems less likely that the choice of co-regulation or self-regulation is impacted by the existence of federalism. At best, there might be an interaction effect: co-regulation and self-regulation might be more palatable options in federal systems precisely because the legislative route is blocked.

In contrast, the existence of constitutional judicial review has clear-cut implications. As described above, the introduction of content regulation on the Internet is often a contentious process since it potentially interferes with central tenets of liberal democracy, which in turn are protected by a constitutional text or its interpretation. The decisions of constitutional courts can thus reject or significantly delay access restrictions, especially those carried out through legal regulation. In states without written constitutions, or without constitutional courts, such blocks or hurdles are not possible—accordingly, our expectation is that this will lead to more regulation.

Using Lijphart's typology of democracies—between consensus and majoritarian systems—also generates several hypotheses. Consensus democracies are normally multiparty systems; when combined with proportional representation, this often leads to coalition governments. More often than not, such systems also feature bicameral decision-making based on principles of federalism, and strong constitutional courts. Taken together, these characteristics erect substantial hurdles against controversial policy changes. On the other end of the spectrum, majoritarian democracies lack these stumbling blocks, and thus can act faster, and have lower consensus thresholds. Of course, such institutional structures do not in themselves determine policy results since they are only the *context* in which political actors make decisions and take actions (Scharpf 1997). Still, an analysis that differentiates systems based on Lijphart's two-dimensional typology (*executives-parties* and *federal-unitary*) seems not only appropriate, but necessary for comparison with other issue areas. We expect more blocking in states where power is concentrated in executives and parties (high values on the first dimension), and in those with few institutional obstacles and veto players (low values on the second dimension).

This concludes our theoretical discussion and the resulting expectations. The following section will give a brief overview of the data set used to test the hypotheses, and present the results of a quantitative test using multivariate regression analysis.

## *Data and Quantitative Analysis*

The data collection, preparation, and analysis proceeded in three steps. First, we documented more than 580 incidents of Internet content blocking from the 1990s onwards. From these, we selected 33 industry-wide blocking schemes in 21 states from 2004 to 2012.<sup>12</sup> We excluded (a) cases of isolated blocking incidents through court orders, or content policies of individual companies, instead focusing on policies that were implemented by all major Internet Service Providers; (b) the cases of Luxembourg and Portugal because of insufficient data; (c) cases before 2004 since the type of blocking adopted afterwards is qualitatively different from previous attempts at online content control. We then combined this data with the political and institutional variables from the “Comparative Political Data Set I” of the University of Bern’s Department of Political Science (Armingeon et al. 2014). We specified a series of standard multivariate and multilevel regressions was specified where the dependent variable was either categorical (regulation type), or binary for each individual blocking type. Regulation type as a categorical variable was modeled with a linear regression, while each type of regulation received its own logit model. Because the data set includes repeated measurements at the state level, both multivariate approaches were further verified through multilevel modeling, where country-level or year-level random effects were incorporated into the intercept term, but not into the slopes of the individual coefficients. The intention was to partially pool the available data to construct an average model of regulation type for the countries in the sample, not create a precise model of any one individual state.<sup>13</sup>

For the logit models, the magnitude changes for each predictor (the substantive effects in terms of percent changes in the dependent variable) are based on average predictive comparisons. Evaluating the model at its mean is problematic given the inclusion of binary and categorical variables, and the tendency to overstate effect magnitudes (Gelman and Hill 2007, 466–473). Unless otherwise stated, the interpretation of average predictive comparisons refers to comparing a low and a high value (one standard deviation around the mean) of the underlying independent variable. The same is true for interpreting the coefficients in the linear model. Comparisons for binary variables refer to the difference between values of 0 and 1.

The results of these tests show that not all previously formulated expectations are borne out. To start, our analysis does not show any consistent effect of the “color” of governments on the extent and type of regulations; the only significant relationship stems from left governments being somewhat more hesitant to employ co-regulation instead of other regulation types (co-regulation is 16% less likely

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<sup>12</sup>The countries included in this analysis are: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

<sup>13</sup>For a much more detailed account of our methodological approach and the empirical results of the regressions summarized here, see Breindl et al. (2015, p. 19).

under left governments). Election years also do not seem to significantly affect regulation choices—additional proof for the assertion that Internet content regulation is not a particularly salient issue for party competition.

There are, however, clear effects of the structure of interest group participation. The less pluralist the interest group structure of a country—in other words, the stronger the role of hierarchies and umbrella organizations, and the more corporatist the system—the more likely is a cooperation between private and public actors through co-regulation. Holding all else constant, countries with a multitude of freely organized, competitive, and nonhierarchically represented collective actors are 63% more likely to choose the path of self-regulatory blocking arrangements, while countries with noncompetitive, hierarchically ordered and functionally differentiated actors are 33% more likely to involve the public side through co-regulation. Note that legal regulation is not significantly impacted by the pluralist–corporatist variable. Pluralism is thus a structural effect, but not one that influences the extent of content regulation.

Variables capturing institutional characteristics such as the degree of federalism and constitutional review (both measured based on Lijphart’s classification) also show clear relationships with regulation. The more pronounced a system’s federalism is, and the stronger its judicial review mechanisms, the lower the probability that *legal regulation* is the chosen avenue of access blocking. Moving from a system with below-average scores in federalism to one above the average results in a 26% decrease in the likelihood to adopt legal measures. This lends credibility to the assumption that the existence of such “choke points” in a political system makes pushing for a legal solution more difficult. This is also supported by regression results which show that when compared to states with weak constitutional courts, strong judicial review makes both self-regulation (+25%) and co-regulation (+15%) more likely, but legislation less likely (−15%). Actors interested in blocking thus seem to try to circumvent key veto players through their choice of regulatory scheme. Again, this is a structural effect, which does not affect the extent of regulation itself.

Regarding Lijphart’s distinction between consensus and majoritarian democracies, only parts of the empirical picture match expectations. On the *executives-parties* dimension, we see more majoritarian democracies being significantly more likely to use legal regulation (+14%) and co-regulation (+30%), but less likely to leave blocking to private actors through self-regulation (−19%). Consensual democracies, on the other hand, are more likely to block through co-regulation. Strong single-party majority systems thus tend to involve the state in regulation, either through legal means or co-regulation schemes; systems involving a variety of actors in their decision-making foster self-regulation. In a similar vein, the *federal-unitary* dimension shows that more federalist states tend to shy away from blocking through the instrument of legislation, while more unitary countries exhibit a 15% greater likelihood for adopting legal regulation. This aligns well with our expectations about veto players in federalist systems and their “displacement effect” increasing the incidence of self-regulation and co-regulation. One hypothesis that is not supported by the data is that of a positive relationship between majoritarian



systems and the *extent* of content regulation; their postulated greater decisiveness does not translate into a systematic tendency to enact more regulation.

## Conclusion

Theorists of democracy and early net activists both understood the expansion of communication channels by means of the Internet as a chance for improving democracy itself, as shown in the introduction to this chapter. New ways of interaction and exchange could reduce the information asymmetry between experts and citizens, enable broader participation in societal discussions, and thus enhance a state's democratic quality. But the developments of past decades have put a damper on such high hopes for the Internet's potential. This is not only due to the limited evidence for the truly deliberative use of the Internet, but also the continued demonstration of the sinking level of public debate in large parts of social media. While ever-growing numbers of users are communicating and sharing their opinions, this quantitative increase is not matched by a qualitative increase in the discussion. It is no accident that the vulgar, but descriptive term of "shitstorm" has been coined specifically for the kind of agitated, breathless, and short-tempered debates that flourish online, where users seem more often to talk about each other, rather than with each other.

Similarly, most notions about the innate resistance against, or even impossibility of, regulation of the Internet and its contents have been overtaken by reality—the Internet no longer "interprets censorship as damage and routes around it," in the words of pioneer John Gilmore. As this chapter has shown, the trend towards regulation and access blocking that started in autocratic system long ago has made a forceful entry unto the stage in liberal democracies since the turn of the century.

But in contrast to autocracies, in liberal democracies the mechanisms and motivations behind content regulation can be traced and analyzed, as the authors have attempted here. What emerged is a complex picture of a political landscape that knows several distinct types of regulatory features, from self-regulation without state interference, to tight control via formal legislation. Although the pressures to deal with the problems related to the Internet as a global phenomenon are similar in all observed countries, they result in different regulatory approaches of varying intensity.

From the perspective of democratic theory, it is a positive finding that political variables can at least partly explain the variation in regulatory schemes. In this way, regulation—which often constitutes a restriction of democratic rights—can actually be influenced by political decisions. Strong basic rights protection through constitutional courts results in a lower incidence of legal regulation of Internet content. Less positive is the fact that this does not lower the total volume of such regulations; instead, our findings imply that the existence of protective mechanisms merely

reroutes regulatory efforts, resulting in blocking being introduced and implemented through self- or co-regulation.

The concept of *embedded democracy* (Merkel 2004) emphasizes the interdependence of subsystems through which a fully developed democratic system is constituted. From this perspective, it is alarming that institutional attempts at protecting basic rights are circumvented by evasive maneuvers described above. Too easily, such attempts result in regulatory solutions that are located on a mostly administrative level, which restricts democratic deliberation, and thus legitimized decisions, about the direction, content, and scope of regulation. This problem has been discussed in the literature mainly in the context of the *CleanFeed* system developed in the United Kingdom and implemented in Canada and Australia (Varadharajan 2010; McIntyre 2013). Realized by British Telecom, the system<sup>14</sup> allows ISPs to block their customers' access to URLs based on blacklists created and administered by an NGO, the *Internet Watch Foundation*. *CleanFeed* was introduced mainly to fight child pornographic content. The UK government pressed all British ISPs to voluntarily implement the system and threatened to pass legislation should adoption not be industry-wide—a classic case of illusory voluntariness in the shadow of hierarchy.

Democratic theory also criticizes such a system because it attempts to replace the regulative relationship between government and citizens with a relationship between citizens and their service provider. This implies a substantial qualitative change: citizens do not have the same options of legal and administrative control towards an ISP as towards state organs and actions. But consumers lack alternatives where all ISPs on the market include content filtering and access restrictions in their terms and services, which might make it difficult to politically challenge the situation, or protest to protect those rights that have been restricted.

Of course, political debates can also prevent regulations from being implemented, as the repeal of the Access Impediment Law in Germany in 2010 has shown. However, there are significant differences between this and the British situation: the German case not only had a clearly articulated legal basis (which allowed a new coalition partner to win recognition for its concerns after a change in government), but also placed the large parts of the implementation into the hands of the public side (the blacklists were to be provided by the Federal Criminal Police Office). It could thus be argued that this way of regulating content presented access points for a political debate which were lacking in the British or Australian case, and that this influenced outcomes.

The mechanisms for content regulation and blocking on the Internet hint at analogies in broader debates about the relationship between freedom and security in established liberal democracies. There, just like in our case, a significant increase in regulation has arguably led to nontrivial qualitative losses in civil liberties (Wagner and Kneip 2015). We must of course still draw a distinction between “true”

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<sup>14</sup>With a nod to Aldous Huxley, the name of the system appeals to citizens' understanding of cleanliness and works to counter possible resistance to its introduction.

autocracies and situations such as those described above, where possibilities for the political contestation of existing regulations, and for a discussion of the compatibility of those regulations with civil liberties and basic rights still exist. Yet despite this categorical difference, Internet content regulation is evidently part of a larger trend of “eroding tendencies” that *embedded democracy* is faced within many established liberal democracies (Merkel 2015a, 490).

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# Chapter 3

## The Emergence and Analysis of European Data Protection Regulation

Murat Karaboga

### Introduction

After decades of debate on the matter, all three major EU institutions finally jointly agreed upon the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU in 2000. As opposed to the Council of Europe's Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ECHR) from 1950, the Charter represents the first distinct set of EU fundamental rights (Council of Europe 1950). It comprises both a compilation of previously affirmed rights in the member states and in several EU legislations as well as European court decisions. It also introduces a new right to data protection or rather makes it *more visible*. Therefore, Article 8 of the EU Charter confirms, "[e]veryone has the right to the protection of personal data concerning him or her." (European Union 2012)<sup>1</sup>

In the meantime, European integration has been progressing further: with the coming into force of the Reform Treaty<sup>2</sup> (better known as the *Lisbon Treaty*) in December 2009, the Charter, which states data protection as a fundamental EU right, gained legally binding character (European Union 2007a). As a result, the structure of the EU and the competences and functionalities of its institutions were subject to fundamental revision. This opened up new options for the EU to rule on data protection issues in the territory of the Union.

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<sup>1</sup>Art. 8 also states that "[s]uch data must be processed fairly for specified purposes and on the basis of the consent of the person concerned or some other legitimate basis laid down by law. Everyone has the right of access to data which has been collected concerning him or her, and the right to have it rectified." And that "[c]ompliance with these rules shall be subject to control by an independent authority."

<sup>2</sup>European Council, Treaty of Lisbon: Amending the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty Establishing the European Community, OJ, C306/01, 2007, Article 1(29).

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At the same time, considerable technological advance and the drastic increase in the use of information technologies by individuals in combination with increasing possibilities of (monetary) utilization of personal data led to the collection of ever-increasing quantities of personal data. Not only public authorities, but also more and more private companies have been processing and exchanging these data with increasingly powerful means irregardless of national borders. Against the background of these technological and societal developments, the prevailing European data protection framework, which is based strongly on the Data Protection Directive (Directive 95/46/EC) from 1995 and which, for two decades, successfully constituted the international standard, was widely considered outdated (Hornung 2012).

Consequently, and in view of the modifications to the institutional structure of the EU, the European Commission initiated a review process of the existing data protection legislation in 2009. Three key problems of the prevailing data protection framework were identified in particular: (1) the insufficient protection of the rights of individuals with regard to modern data processing technologies, (2) the inadequate level of harmonization of data protection laws across the EU, and (3) the continuing challenge to handle the increasingly global nature of data flows (European Commission 2010).

After 2 more years of crafting, a complete legislative proposal, the data protection reform package—that besides the General Data Protection Regulation included a Directive related to the protection of personal data in the area of criminal matters and the police—was announced in January 2012. The GDPR should, however, certainly not be regarded as an isolated policy. It is embedded in a broader strategy of the European Union to create and shape a European Digital Economy in order to keep up with US and Asian competitors and is, thus, accompanied by several initiatives in domains such as innovation, technology, and research policy (Oettinger 2015; European Commission 2015).

Following the ordinary legislative procedure, the European Parliament and the Council of Ministers had to discuss the proposal and adopt and if necessary revise their positions successively. However, progress in the negotiations was slow: the comprehensive character of the reform<sup>3</sup> attracted the attention of a broad range of stakeholders involving a high number of individual as well as corporate actors from several levels of government and member states, and from civil society and business interest groups, in order to influence the shaping of the Regulation. The responsible politicians from the Commission and Parliament described the amount of industry lobbying as excessive and unprecedented (Warman 2012; Albrecht 2013). Due to the continuing technological change and upheaval, even fact-finding

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<sup>3</sup>In order to harmonize European data protection law and on the basis of the recent institutional and legal changes in the structure of the EU, the Commission regarded the instrument of a regulation as necessary. While a directive leaves the member states some room in the implementation of its basic provisions, a Regulation is a binding legislative act, which, after its entry into force, has to be directly applied in its entirety in every member state. [http://europa.eu/eu-law/decision-making/legal-acts/index\\_en.html](http://europa.eu/eu-law/decision-making/legal-acts/index_en.html)

proved to be difficult, thus complicating the already difficult policy-making process even further. While some member states opposed the instrument of a regulation or the aspiration for power of the Commission, businesses at home and abroad welcomed the efforts towards increased harmonization in order to reduce compliance costs. However, they disapproved the—from their particular perspective harsh—modernized rules on data protection such as the so-called right to be forgotten or the obstruction of transborder data flows to Non-EU countries. At the same time, data protection affine actors criticized the regulation for being by no means strict enough, e.g., not addressing phenomena such as big data, Internet of things, or cloud computing (Schwartz 2015: 337 ff.; De Hert and Papakonstantinou 2016: 180). After 4 years of intense negotiations and following more than half a year of trilogue negotiations, the reform was concluded by the end of 2015. The compromise text was then adopted by the Council of Ministers and Parliament in April 2016. Accordingly, Regulation 2016/679 will come into effect in late May 2018.

Nevertheless, despite the fact that European data protection politics, which is closely related to economic and innovation policies, has been having a firm place on the member states and Unions policy agenda for decades and has been regularly involving harsh disputes over its concrete regulation, political science—with only a few exceptions—has neglected the topic. To some extent, the spread of the Internet and the proliferation of surveillance activities since 9/11 and especially the Snowden revelations have had an impact on data protection and privacy-related political science publications. However, unfortunately, concerning the emergence of European data protection and its increase in importance, a fundamental discussion based on political science theories and frameworks is still lacking.

The aim of this chapter is to introduce the topic of European data protection politics and to encourage political scientists to investigate the subject. Thus, starting with the current state of research, an overview of existing explanatory models and theories on the causes and the course of European data protection politics and of research gaps is provided in section “State of the Art”. The section concludes with remarks and advice on how to engage research on European data protection politics. The following section “The Emergence of European Data Protection Politics” will provide a brief overview of the evolution of European data protection politics and policies, from early national initiatives in the late 1960s to the adoption of the recent EU Regulation. Based on the remarks made in sections “State of the Art” and “The Emergence of European Data Protection Politics”, the chapter is rounded off (section “Conclusion”) with concluding considerations on the analysis of European data protection politics.

## State of the Art

An understanding of privacy or of the distinction between the private and the public has been common for thousands of years (Geuss 2001), whereas the term data protection is comparably young and dates back to the 1960s.<sup>4</sup> The overwhelming majority of scientific publications related to data protection and privacy stem from legal scholars and computer scientists.<sup>5</sup> Besides, a series of philosophical contributions from several disciplines contribute to a normative discussion on the value of privacy. Political science publications, however, especially with a focus on European Union data protection politics, still constitute just a small part of the otherwise rapidly growing data protection scholarship.

Although privacy was a topic long before the spread of the Internet (Warren and Brandeis 1890), it was the emergence of novel information processing technologies during the second half of the twentieth century, which initiated intense debate on the issue. As the possibilities to collect and process various data, including personal data, were becoming apparent, the outspoken interest of state officials in using these data for the purpose of the governance of populations stimulated a series of scholarly discussions in Western societies on the normative and regulatory aspects of the intrusion of privacy. Mainly legal scholars were involved in these early discussions while some computer scientists were contributing to a better understanding of the technological possibilities (Westin 1967; Steinmüller et al. 1971; Ware 1973). As the European data protection community comprising primarily legal experts transformed into an institutionalized group of substate actors with domestic authority throughout the 1970s and 1980s due to data protection statutes being passed in several European countries, the focus shifted towards the description, application, and diffusion of these laws (Simitis 1987; Flaherty 1984). However, publications stemming from legal scholarship continue to focus on the description of the scope, content, and application of data protection laws (Rule and Greenleaf 2008) while an understanding of the aspect of how these laws passed and why they were adopted in this specific form and differed between jurisdictions is rather underdeveloped. This is, however, exactly what the toolbox of several

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<sup>4</sup>There is disagreement over the origin of the term: according to Garstka (2008: 134), the term is oriented on the concept of machine protection (*Maschinenschutz*), which was, similar to the term data protection, not about protecting machines (resp. protecting data) but protecting the individual workers on machines (resp. the individual to whom the data belongs). Simitis (2014: 83 f.), in contrast, regards the idea of data security (*Datensicherung*) behind the term data protection, as the first data protection laws were rather meant to guarantee (the correct functioning of information systems by providing) data security, secrecy, and accuracy.

<sup>5</sup>The constructors and programmers of mainframes, statisticians, mathematicians, and computer scientists have been involved in data protection debates since the very beginning and still continue to do so by tackling current technological possibilities and their future developments which are of importance to data protection (Mattern 2007). Besides, other disciplines analyze several rather specific aspects of privacy, i.e., the economics of privacy (Brandimarte and Acquisti 2012), privacy in online social networks (Trepte and Reinecke 2011), or the functioning of data markets (Bründl et al. 2015).



political science fields such as policy analysis or comparative politics offers, and yet the first publications only emerged in the late 1980s originating mainly from the Anglo-American region.<sup>6</sup>

### ***The Analysis of Governance-Related Aspects of Data Protection***

Colin Bennett, located at the University of Victoria in Canada since the mid 1980s, provided a comparison and analysis of national data protection legislation in Sweden, the United States, West Germany, and Great Britain from the perspective of comparative policy analysis (Bennett 1988, 1992). By exploring different potential explanations, Bennett analyzes the relationship between content and context in each country and investigates the interaction between the transnational context motivating convergence and the domestic context forcing divergence (*ibid.*). Since then, Bennett has remained true to the field and has put out several publications, including the comprehensive work “The Governance of Privacy: Policy Instruments in Global Perspective” (2006) together with Charles Raab from the University of Edinburgh in Scotland. Against the background of the growing complexity of privacy issues due to the global information revolution since the proliferation of the Internet and electronic devices during the 1990s, and the subsequent adoption of data protection legislation in several jurisdictions across the globe—of which the EU Directive 95/46/EC is the most prominent—the governance of privacy has been analyzed in a much broader sense. Thus, the analyses not only include a comparison of governmental top-down regulation, but also self-regulation (codes of practice, standards, and privacy protection seals) and governance by technology, namely privacy-enhancing technologies (*ibid.*). Among the little researched issue of data protection politics, the global diffusion of data privacy norms is one of the more popular research subjects (Heisenberg and Fandel 2004).

Busch (2013), on the other hand, analyzes the conflicts, negotiations, and agreements in the regulation of transatlantic data traffic between the EU and the United States since the adoption of Directive 95/46/EC. Based on three case studies—(1) the *safe harbor* agreement,<sup>7</sup> (2) the exchange of Passenger name records (PNR), and of (3) financial transactions data—Busch shows how achieving a compromise was possible in the case of *safe harbor* during the late 1990s. However, the incident of September 11, 2001 shifted the dominant interpretative frame from commerce to security and resulted in aggressive and one-sided action

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<sup>6</sup>Although there is literature in German and French and certainly in many other languages, too, this chapter deliberately focuses on English literature in order to arrive at a common denominator.

<sup>7</sup>Such an agreement was necessary since Directive 95/46/EC prohibits the transfer of data to any countries without adequate data protection provisions.

by the United States. The explanatory strength of the dominating constructivist approach as to the regulation of cross-border traffic is then augmented by the analytical perspective of “frames by which actors view and interpret the topic in question” (ibid.: 329) and by considering institutional facts like the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon which provided considerable blockade powers to the European Parliament. In addition, Busch draws attention to how global power relations affect data protection politics as an external factor—an even less studied aspect in the actual governance of privacy.

Other scholars investigate the functioning of Data Protection Authorities (DPAs), a cornerstone of any comprehensive data protection legislation. Schütz (2012) explores the independence of DPAs in a cross-country comparison between Germany, Poland, Sweden, and the UK while Righettini (2011) compares the institutionalization, leadership, and regulative policy style of French and Italian DPAs.

Very interestingly, but limited to the Netherlands, Koops (2011) shows how a period of “two decades of crafting general privacy frameworks in the Constitution and comprehensive data protection legislation” since the late 1960s (ibid.: 175) was followed by a period of “two decades of updating these general frameworks in light of the technological developments while also passing many privacy-diminishing laws to serve other policy goals” since the 1980s. Koops considers two possible explanations for this policy change: either there was a shift from generally privacy-friendly policy to generally privacy-unfriendly policy, or a shift in focus from general, privacy-centric frameworks to specific, privacy-unrelated legislation targeted at other, higher ranking policy goals such as protection against organized crime, immigration, health and safety issues, which again draws the attention to the importance of external events (ibid.).

In contrast to most policy-oriented scholars, Priscilla Regan from George Mason University in Virginia has shed light on how the predominant liberal individualistic conception of privacy obstructs the adoption of privacy legislation by Congress in the United States when other, societal interests are at stake (Regan 1995). Regan thereby forms a bridge between political science discussions on the how and why of policy processes and ongoing philosophical discussions on the content and value of privacy (see below).

### ***Privacy Advocacy***

Abraham Newman, another Northern American scholar, from Georgetown University, has also contributed to a better understanding of data protection politics. In “Protectors of Privacy” (2008a), he carries out research at the interface between policy analysis and international political economy and investigates the interactions between the emergence of the EU Data Protection Directive and the global economy. The key finding is that against the predictions of liberal intergovernmentalism and neofunctionalism, powerful member states and critical industries did not lobby

for European intervention in order to facilitate transborder flows of data by leveling the fragmented European data protection legislation, as predicted by the former. The European Commission did not strive for supranational legislation by forming a coalition with transnational interest groups in order to expand its competencies and broaden the scope of supranational decision-making either, as the latter would predict. Instead, Newman shows that a network of transgovernmental policy entrepreneurs, comprising national data protection officials, by relying on their power resources (technical expertise, domestically delegated authority and network ties), successfully lobbied the European Institutions, and especially the Commission, to adopt common EU legislation (Newman 2008a: 74 ff.). Further research provides evidence that national data protection authorities are still central in advocating data protection (Raab 2011). At the same time, new protagonists such as non-governmental organizations and civil society organizations (i.e., Privacy International in Europe, EPIC in the United States) have entered the scene of data protection advocacy during the past 30 years, and have been expanding their political influence ever since (Bennett 2008). Besides, the so-called unusual suspects are mentioned, too: while privacy protection has traditionally been a typical left-wing topic, new actors keep on entering the scene of data protection, such as human or digital rights groups, right-wing libertarians, Internet providers, and consumer protection groups (Koops 2011; Bennett 2008). Some of these have a comprehensive policy agenda comprising data protection besides broader civil liberties (ibid.). Others refer to data protection while pursuing particular interests, i.e., Internet providers forming an ad hoc coalition with privacy groups in order to prevent the adoption of the EU Data Retention Directive 2006/24/EC as it happened in Germany (Fritz 2013). Bennett states that “those [privacy groups] at the center possess a set of core beliefs about the importance of privacy, and as one passes to the outer edges, the issue becomes more and more peripheral.” (Bennett 2008: 59) Regan (1999), on the other hand, offers deep insights into how American businesses formed a transatlantic coalition of American and European companies and successfully lobbied against the draft Data Protection Directive of 1990—which was regarded as overly restrictive—in order to shape a more business-friendly Directive.

### ***Internet Governance and Privacy***

Another strand in the literature can be identified in the context of the emerging interdisciplinary Internet Governance scholarship: following the enormous consequences of the Internet, its social implications are considered from a range of perspectives including political science. Bendorath (2007), for example, analyzes the role of nation states in the changing governance architecture of Internet privacy. He notes that after decades of law-based regulation, data protection is increasingly affected by transnational self-regulation mechanisms (i.e., *social codes* of conduct) pushed forward by the private sector while the state is supposed to change its governance mechanisms towards influencing technology development or *technical*

*codes* (i.e., through certifications, standards development, or public funding of privacy-enhancing technologies). However, most of the Internet governance literature does not feature the issue of data protection to a similar extent and rather revolves around many other questions related to the governance of the Internet. These include, for example, the multi-stakeholder governance of the Internet architecture both at the software and hardware level, Internet access issues and related disputes around network neutrality, or the treatment of Internet freedom and intellectual property while data protection is only one of the many issues in this catalogue (Goldsmith and Wu 2006; Betz and Kübler 2013; DeNardis 2014). Yet, the Internet governance literature may offer valuable insights into the analysis of governance processes since the much-discussed issue of multi-stakeholder bottom-up governance of Internet issues (Hofmann 2016) is also reflected in the governance of privacy as was shown above.

### ***The Value and Content of Privacy***

Apart from the political science literature, which usually focuses on regulatory aspects of informational privacy or data protection, theoretical discussions about the value and content of privacy regularly address both different—informational, decisional, spatial—dimensions and various aspects of privacy.

The idea of privacy, starting with Warren and Brandeis (1890), has changed in the past decades from a defensive *right to be let alone* that follows the American Bill of Rights' fourth amendment and that imagines the home as the primary defense and the state as the primary enemy (Whitman 2004) into a positive right that gives each individual active control over one's own personal data (Westin 1967). Literature that is more recent discusses the elusiveness of a single definition of privacy, which is often illustrated by Solove's remark that "Privacy seems to encompass everything, and therefore it appears to be nothing in itself" (Solove 2008: 7). Nissenbaum (2010), by stressing the contextual nature of privacy, takes a similar line. Closely related to this, it is discussed whether privacy incorporates a rather intrinsic or functional value (Roessler 2005).

However, over the last few years, the understanding of privacy, as it is discussed by the aforementioned scholars and as it is institutionalized within both—despite all the differences—US and EU privacy regimes, has been widely criticized. The prevailing privacy paradigm, as has been stated by Raab, "sees society as comprising relatively autonomous individuals, and holds an image of society comprising their sum total: individuals who need privacy in order to perform citizen roles in a liberal-democratic state." (Raab 2012)

The overall direction of these criticisms depends on the theoretical tradition of the respective scholar. Thus, the liberal-individualist understanding of privacy is criticized regarding its incapability to deal with societal privacy challenges, imposed by technological developments, such as the internet of things and big data (Matzner 2014), its problematic distinction between the public and private that,

for example, rendered domestic violence against women invisible (DeCew 2015), or its incapability to address further societal challenges imposed by surveillance (Roberts 2015).

Since the European General Data Protection Regulation is only directly related to the regulation of the former, this criticism will be briefly outlined. The central argument in this sense is that the self-determined provision of personal data by a random individual, which is in complete accordance with privacy norms in force, can raise privacy considerations of other persons, whose data is only indirectly involved, or about whom no data has been collected at all. This happens by deducing information through connecting other data sets, gathered within the Internet of things and analyzing them with big data techniques and thus, due to correlation, providing information way beyond the persons in the context in which the data was initially gathered and allowing to affect and thus endanger the self-determination of others. Prevailing transparency, purpose-limitation, and self-determination norms that focus on an overly individual understanding of privacy fail to compete with these challenges. In the consequence, a broader social perspective on privacy and related institutionalized norms that move beyond the existing ones are called for, which may deal with privacy violations of others (Matzner 2014). Similar observations have been made by others, such as Regan (1995), De Hert, and Gutwirth (2006) as well as communitarian theorists (Raab 2012), but also by privacy activists.

Indeed, others argue that the EU Data Protection Directive originally already concerned a societal, and not an individual, interest (Van Der Sloot 2014) and also the influential census decision of the German Constitutional Court from 1983 actually points out that a loss of informational self-determination would not only affect the individual, but also democratic society as a whole.

## *Surveillance and Data Protection*

Since 9/11 and the subsequent adoption of surveillance and security laws in western democracies,<sup>8</sup> and more recently after the Snowden revelations on the mass surveillance activities of western secret services, data protection, and surveillance have become the topic of a large number of publications (i.e., Lyon 2002; Wright and Kreissl 2015; Busch 2015). Although overlapping with studies on data protection and privacy, the field of surveillance studies in its modern form dates back at least to the 1950s. Against the background of the increased awareness of human rights abuses since colonialism, fascism, real socialism, and anti-democratic tendencies within democratic societies and technological developments with

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<sup>8</sup>On the EU-level alone, at least 239 legislative and nonlegislative measures—including 88 legally binding measures such as EU regulations and directives—were adopted between 9/11 and 2013 (Hayes and Jones 2013: 25).

far-reaching societal implications, the field draws from the scholarly work of Foucault, the *dominant grandfather* of contemporary studies, and from the literary work of Huxley, Orwell, and Kafka (Marx 2012: xxvii). However, over the past 20 years, the multidisciplinary field of surveillance studies has matured towards a separate discipline comprising own university chairs, journals, theories, and frameworks (Lyon et al. 2012). At the same time, surveillance scholars claim surveillance studies to encompass a more comprehensive understanding of the global societal consequences of increasing surveillance than privacy concepts and rights-based theory, due to being too much based on liberal assumptions about subjectivity, are able to (Stalder 2011; Bennett 2011).

Despite the interdependence of surveillance and data protection, European data protection legislation in the public and private sector, which is the focus of this chapter, usually excludes matters relating to surveillance, public and national security, defense, and to the criminal justice system (see Simitis 1995: 452 ff.). At the European level, this is due to critical policy decisions in the past and due to the former institutional pillar structure: the EU consisted of three pillars between 1993 and 2009, with the first pillar corresponding to the European Communities, the second pillar to the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), and the third pillar to police and judicial cooperation in criminal matters including asylum and immigration issues. Even though the Commission attempted to extend the principles of the Data Protection Directive beyond the limits of the first pillar to the third pillar, the initiative could not generate any support among the member states (González Fuster 2014: 145). Thus, the regulation of surveillance and police matters is partially negotiated within different institutional settings, involves also different actors, and has, as a result, its own set of rules.<sup>9</sup>

## Synopsis

Characteristic of all the publications of the governance section is that they either have a global or national focus, discussing European data protection politics as one influential framework but due to the interest in the global (Bennett and Raab 2006; Newman 2008a), respectively, national (Regan 1995; Bendrath 2007) regulation of privacy, still as only one of many measures. Yet other scholars have a comparative focus, either regarding transatlantic relations (Bennett 1992; Busch 2013) or intra-European comparisons (Schütz 2012; Righettini 2011). Although Newman (2008a) provides a profound analysis of the driving factors in the emergence of

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<sup>9</sup>As mentioned in the introduction, the recent data protection reform package of the EU Commission consisted not only of a proposal for a General Data Protection Regulation, but also of Directive 2016/680 *on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data by competent authorities for the purposes of the prevention, investigation, detection or prosecution of criminal offenses or the execution of criminal penalties, and on the free movement of such data, and repealing Council Framework Decision 2008/977/JHA.*

Directive 95/46/EC, his analysis lacks depth: while the findings are empirically backed by a large number of interviews with national and European Experts and while several apparently important meetings are mentioned, he fails to show in detail, who exactly was involved in these meetings, what the binding glue (i.e., a shared vision or common beliefs) of the involved participants was and how these networks actually emerged, exchanged views or worked and evolved over time.

However, a comprehensive political science analysis of the emergence of the European data protection framework with a focus on the specific temporal constellation of actors, beliefs, interests, institutions, and relevant external events is still missing. Nevertheless, the literature discussed above provides valuable insights into several important aspects of European data protection politics, i.e., regarding the role of institutional settings and of transgovernmental policy entrepreneurs (Newman 2008a), the cooperation of American businesses with their European counterparts (Regan 1999), the complex global governance of privacy as the context within which European data protection politics has to assert itself (Bennett and Raab 2006), the individual or societal value ascribed to privacy and inscribed to the social practices of actors (Regan 1995; Solove 2008; Raab 2012 and many others). Yet, attention is also drawn to the impact of external events, such as the creation of the Internal Market or policy spillover effects from other policy subsystems (Koops 2011; Busch 2013). These findings could certainly serve as a starting point for the analysis of European data protection politics.

Besides, the valuable knowledge of legal experts should be taken into account, too: recently, from the perspective of legal studies, Gloria González Fuster (2014), for example, presented a comprehensive analysis of the emergence of personal data protection as a fundamental right of the EU. And legal practitioners that were involved in policy processes, such as Simitis (1995), provide deep knowledge not only of legal contents but also of the policy process itself, and should be included in any desk research regarding policy processes.

For the purpose of practical research, it makes sense to consider different sources of information: written information (any form of official documents, minutes of meetings and statements of stakeholders, but also secondary literature by scholars of several disciplines) as well as survey information (through interviews and questionnaires). Furthermore, researchers may also seek to achieve a better understanding of policy processes through participatory observation at open parliamentary hearings, plenary debates, or panel discussions in which key stakeholders participate.

In any case, the existing literature provides a rich enough information base, in order to sketch the emergence of European data protection politics along the major lines of its national origins, early international harmonization efforts, and the eventual adoption of comprehensive rules across the EU and their recent revision.

## The Emergence of European Data Protection Politics

Throughout the last decades, efforts were made towards protecting personal data and thereby individuals from misuse of their data and to enable transborder flows of data, recognizing the related benefits to the international economy. Now, the regulation of data privacy takes place at several levels of global, regional, and national governance involving a complex web of state regulation, self-regulation, and technological regulation. These interact and manage how personal data is used and shared across modern societies (Bennett and Raab 2006; Newman 2013). While the backbones of these efforts are formal regulatory rules, over the years, two different approaches with variation in regulatory scope and structure have emerged: comprehensive and limited regimes. Comprehensive regimes are strongly based on a set of formal rules that are derived from fundamental rights and freedoms and that are enforced across the public and private sectors through independent regulatory agencies. Conversely, limited regimes apply formal rules to the public sector while relying mainly on sectoral privacy laws, self-regulation and technology in the private sector, and in large part, lack an institutional monitoring and enforcement mechanism (Newman 2013).

While the United States is regarded as the prime example of a limited privacy regime, the most well-known example of a comprehensive privacy regime is the European (Union) approach to data protection, which is primarily elaborated by Directive 95/46/EC. However, the adoption of comprehensive European rules was the result of many decades of political discourse. This discourse will be the focus of the following section.

### *Four Generations of National Data Protection Laws*

Early national and supranational European debates on privacy date back to the late 1960s. Already at that time, advances of information processing technologies had awoken the interest of public authorities in centralizing various governmental information sources in enormous national data banks (Flaherty 1989). The fear of government misuse of the collected data promoted public and expert debate. Eventually, this resulted in what we know today as data protection regulation (Newman 2008a; Bennett 1992: 53 ff.). The first data protection law was adopted by the German state Hesse in 1970, followed by Sweden in 1973, and West Germany in 1977 (ibid.: 57).

A useful approach to analyzing the development of European data protection politics is provided by Mayer-Schönberger (1997), who proposes distinguishing between four generations of national data protection laws. The abovementioned laws represent the first generation of data protection norms. However, these did not focus on the direct protection of individual privacy but on setting specific rules that would allow the operation of specific technologies while protecting privacy through technology-specific safeguards ensuring data security, secrecy, and accuracy. Supervisory authorities were set up in order to investigate compliance with data protection norms (ibid.: 224).



As technology advanced throughout the 1970s, large-scale computers were replaced by much smaller computers, which began to proliferate into several—both public and private—areas of society. As a result, the technologically specific focus of first-generation data protection laws could no longer be applied to these newly emerging computerized environments. In the meantime, not only governmental data banks, but also the processing of data by thousands of computers across the country in the private sector were regarded as a threat to privacy. Concepts of the individual privacy rights of citizens, stemming from negative liberties and individual freedom were thus brought back into the discussion (ibid.: 226). Accordingly, second-generation data protection laws moved away from attempts to regulate specific technologies and aimed at more technologically neutral regulation. Besides this, individuals' rights were "reinforced, linked to constitutional provisions, broadened, and extended." (ibid.)

This tendency continued during the third generation of data protection law in the 1980s, but in a constantly changing societal and technological context. As information processing was becoming more common and information was now flowing between computer networks while civic involvement was enjoying a revival, individual data protection rights granted in second-generation laws and derived from negative liberties and freedoms were regarded as too rough due to their comprising an "all-or-nothing" approach to individual data protection. Third-generation data protection laws, in contrast, extended individual participation rights to all stages of information processing—collection, storing, processing, and transfer (ibid.: 231). By doing this, data protection rights were transforming into a right, connected more strongly with concepts of positive, rather than negative, freedom, of which the German Constitutional Court's census decision of 1983 that established the right to *informational self-determination*, is the best-known example. Several legislative amendments in German states' data protection statutes, in the German Federal Data Protection Act and the data protection statutes of other European states were the consequence of this judgment (ibid.: 231).

Although these laws granted far-reaching participation rights to individuals, the high monetary and social costs in the exercise of these rights prevented them from filing lawsuits against potentially problematic data processing and often resulted in routinely contracting away their right to informational self-determination. Consequently, third-generation data protection laws—although ambitious—failed to provide a high level of data protection for most individuals. Hence, fourth-generation data protection laws aimed at strengthening the bargaining position of the individual (when exercising his or her right) and at the same time giving up parts of the participatory burden given to the individuals in the data protection norms of former generations.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Strengthening the individual should be achieved, for example, by introducing a "no-fault compensation for individual data protection claims." In contrast, the participatory burden should be reduced by taking away certain personal data from the individual's disposition: The prohibition of the processing of sensitive personal data (data regarding race, religion, political opinions, etc.) was the consequence of this shift (ibid.: 233).

## *Early Efforts on the International Level*

As the possibilities of information processing technologies began to become clear in the late 1960s, both the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the Council of Europe were grappling with the potential intrusion on privacy (González Fuster 2014: 75 ff.). Out of concern over the possible hindrance of transborder data flows after several European states had adopted data protection laws during the 1970s and due to the divergence of these national regulations, both organizations began to work on supranational data protection instruments. One of the results was the adoption of the nonbinding *OECD Guidelines Governing the Protection of Privacy and Transborder Flows of Personal Data* in 1980 which were hardly conducive to establishing good data protection practices, but rather to justifying self-regulatory approaches (Bennett and Raab 2006: 87 ff.). Another effort was the *Convention for the Protection of Individuals with regard to Automatic Processing of Personal Data (Convention 108)*<sup>11</sup> which had been in progress since 1976 (Council of Europe 1981: 4), adopted by the Council of Europe in 1980 and opened for Ratification in 1981.

Meanwhile, the European Commission recognized the growing social and economic importance of data processing first in 1973. A Communication to the Council of Ministers stressed the need to protect individuals by establishing common ground rules early, rather than to be obliged to harmonize conflicting legislation after the damage had been done (Commission of the European Communities 1973). In the following years, the Commission, however, was hesitant to make a move itself. Simitis, former data privacy commissioner of the German state of Hesse who has been involved in the drafting of several documents—such as the Directive 95/46/EC and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU—describes that the Commission’s priority since the 1970s was to support the establishment of an “information market,” rather than policies aimed at restricting the processing of personal data. These were regarded as a possible threat to the promotion of computer-based processing (Simitis 1995: 446). Apart from that, the Commission’s restraint was also an expression of the limited formal competences the Commission had at that time. Its area of activity was the market, not the public sector (ibid.: 452). The Council of Ministers—respectively, the member states—showed little interest in supranational action either (Newman 2008a: 85).

While the Commission and Council restricted their activities to fact-finding, i.e., by funding studies, rather than to establishing substantial legislation, the European Parliament was urging the Commission to propose Community legislation to harmonize data protection law by issuing several resolutions since 1975.<sup>12</sup> As the

<sup>11</sup>Council of Europe. “Convention for the Protection of Individuals with Regard to Automatic Processing of Personal Data, No. 108.” Strasbourg: Council of Europe, January 28, 1981.

<sup>12</sup>See: European Parliament (1975). *Resolution on the Protection of the Rights of the Individual in the Face of Developing Technical Progress in the Field of Automatic Data Processing*. Brussels, 1975; European Parliament (1976). *Resolution on the Protection of the Rights of the Individual in*

Council of Europe was working on the matter of data protection, and in response to the Parliament's repeated calls for action, Lorenzo Natali, Vice-President of the Commission stated that the Commission would prefer to wait for the results of the work of the Council of Europe (González Fuster 2014: 120). Finally, after the adoption of Convention 108, the Commission concluded that the Convention was an appropriate instrument for the harmonization of European data protection law. Accordingly, there was no need for EC regulation (Commission of the European Communities 1981).

### *The Emergence of the European Data Protection Framework*

Despite the fact that the ratification of the Convention operated as a template for the incorporation of its principles into domestic law, ultimately, it did not serve as a binding instrument of international law and thus failed to harmonize European data protection law (Bennett and Raab 2006: 84 ff.). In addition, the significance of transborder flows of personal data grew throughout the 1980s and the increasing divergence posed a threat to the free flow of information between member states. The decisive impetus for Community legislation finally came in the late 1980s, when the delegated domestic authority of national data protection officials highlighted the scope of the problem. As the French national data protection authority CNIL (Commission Nationale de l'Informatique et des Libertés) blocked the transfer of information between the Fiat corporate offices in France and Italy in 1989, due to Italy not having adequate data protection regulations, it was becoming increasingly clear that the absence of harmonized data protection legislation could impede the creation of the Internal Market—due to be completed by 1992 (Newman 2008a: 87 ff.). Consequently, the European Commission initiated a legislative process to adopt European Community data protection law in September 1990 (Bennett and Raab 2006: 93 f.).

The agenda setting of the draft Directive was dominated by officials and representatives from data privacy authorities while only little consultation occurred with the private sector (Newman 2008a: 91 f.). Consequently, many private interests in Europe and North America (Bennett and Raab 2006: 94) regarded the initial draft as overly restrictive. National governments and European business resisted the centralization of data protection at the supranational level and, by lobbying for the subsidiarity principle, supported flexibility in national enforcement models (Newman 2008a: 92). American businesses, especially direct marketing and credit reporting companies, which feared an obstruction of transnational flows of data

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*the Face of Developing Technical Progress in the Field of Automatic Data Processing*. Luxembourg, 5 March 1976; European Parliament (1979). *Resolution on the Protection of the Rights of the Individual in the Face of Technical Developments in Data Processing*. Luxembourg, 6 May 1979.

as a consequence of the Directive, allied with their European counterparts in order to lower the Directive's standards (Regan 1999). But the policy-making process also consisted of shifting coalitions and strange bedfellows: “[b]oth industry and data protection authorities could support the same goal for different reasons—industry in countries with existing regulations hoped to limit the implementation costs of the directive, whereas data privacy authorities committed themselves to raising data protection levels across the EU, while respecting national enforcement institutions.” (Newman 2008b: 117)

After the Parliament's amendments, the Commission issued a revised draft in 1992 and finally, after a common position was reached in spring 1995 by the Council of Ministers, the most influential data protection policy instrument to date, the Directive 95/46/EC was passed in October 1995. The policy instrument of a Directive requires member states to integrate its provisions into national law, but leaves some room regarding how this implementation takes place. The transposition of Directive 95/46/EC's principles into domestic law, due to be completed by 1998, consisted of four fundamental elements: (1) the adoption of comprehensive national legislation regarding the public and private sectors in order to achieve harmonized data protection legislation across the Union, (2) the establishment of independent national supervisory authorities, (3) the necessity to demonstrate or adopt an adequate level of data protection by non-EU countries in order to be able to process data of European citizens, and (4) the creation of a standing supranational advisory committee comprising national data privacy officials, the Article 29 Working Party, to advise the Commission on issues relating to data protection and to promote harmonization throughout the EU (Newman 2008a: 93 f.).

### ***The Emergence of the General Data Protection Regulation***

Considerable technological advance and the drastic increase in the use of information technologies by individuals during the two decades since the adoption of Directive 95/46/EC in combination with the increasing economic utility of personal data has led to the collection of ever-increasing quantities of personal data, not only by public authorities, but also by private companies which process and exchange these data in ever more powerful ways across national boundaries.

Legislation was introduced to meet the challenges brought by electronic communication and the Internet, e.g., the e-Privacy Directive 2002/58/EC concerning the processing of personal data and the protection of privacy in the electronic communications sector and Directive 2002/22/EC on universal service and users' rights relating to electronic communications networks and their later amendment by the EU Cookie Directive 2009/136/EC (Pouillet 2010). Provisions of these directives (such as mandatory breach notification), however, only covered the electronic communications sector. Other relevant areas, such as the financial sector, remained untouched.

The EU Commission, which had been monitoring the effectiveness of Directive 95/46/EC reported on the implementation of the Directive in 2003 and 2007 (Commission of the European Communities 2003, 2007). Despite national divergences in implementation, the Commission concluded the Directive remained appropriate as to both secure the free flow of personal data within the internal market and to secure a high level of data protection in the Community (Commission of the European Communities 2007: 6).

In the meantime, however, European integration has progressed further: by signing the Reform Treaty (or *Lisbon Treaty*) in 2009, the structure of the EU and the competences and functionalities of EU institutions were fundamentally revised and data protection became a fundamental right of the EU. First, with the suspension of the traditional pillar structure of the EU and the distinction between supranational Community law (regarding *foreign trade, the internal market, and freedom of movement*—first pillar) and intergovernmental European Union law (regarding *police and judicial cooperation in criminal matters*—third pillar), the competences of EU institutions to regulate on these matters were expanded. Second, since the signing of the Lisbon Treaty, the primary legal basis of the EU has been constituted by the Treaty on European Union (TEU) (European Union 2007b) and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) (European Union 2007c). By replacing Article 286 of the Treaty Establishing the European Community (TEC or Rome Treaty) (European Union 1957) with Article 16 TFEU, European Union competence to enact consistent data protection legislation was formally recognized. At the same time, the Charter of Fundamental Rights became legally binding and the TEU provides member states both to join the ECHR and that its provisions on human rights should constitute the general principles of Union law. Following the Articles 7 and 8 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights (and to some extent Art. 7 ECHR), every person has the *right to respect for private and family life* and the *right to the protection of personal data concerning him or her*, accordingly. Although the provision of Art 7 ECHR (European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms) on the *right to respect for private and family life* was considered during the policy process for Directive 95/46/EC, ever since the Lisbon treaty, data protection has to be explicitly addressed in legal weighing processes.

Consequently, the EU Commission initiated a review process of European data protection law from mid-2009 until 2011, including a high-level conference and several closed and public consultation rounds. Hundreds of individual and institutional stakeholders were involved in these consultations.

The review of European data protection legislation, however, should be understood in the broader context of managing the digitization of society. Since the early 2000s, the Commission and European Politics at various levels has taken up the challenge of advising and monitoring the digitization of society in order to ensure that its implications are economically profitable and socially just at the same time. On the one hand, this activity was due to missed opportunities since the proliferation of the Internet in the 1990s and of digital services and smart devices since the middle of the last decade, which is regarded as the reason why the EU has lost

ground to US and Asian competitors in the digital economy. On the other hand, the EU has been seriously striving to shape innovation in a way that it is compatible with people's needs and European fundamental rights (Karaboga et al. 2017). It is the political context of the EU attempting to protect fundamental rights while maintaining its role in the global economy, within which such efforts as to the handling of personal data are integrated (Newman 2008a: 142 ff.).

Meanwhile, market-oriented policy participants and some member states still hoped to prevent the introduction of the policy instrument of an EU regulation and preferred a directive throughout these initial stakeholder consultations. The Commission however, announced that a comprehensive approach is required in order to meet the challenges [(1) modernization of the framework, (2) harmonization throughout the EU, and (3) global transborder data flows] of the prevailing framework (European Commission 2010: 4). Accordingly and by making use of the new legal basis, Viviane Reding, the Vice-President and Commissioner responsible for Justice, Fundamental Rights and Citizenship at that time, presented the data protection reform package in January 2012. The package consisted of a Directive related to the protection of personal data in the area of criminal matters and the police and of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) to replace the existing Directive 95/46/EC. Those stakeholders, who had not been successful in preventing the proposal of the instrument of a regulation, thereupon intensified their efforts to prevent a further expansion of data protection rights during the EU co-decision procedure. As the Council of Ministers negotiations are held behind closed doors and thus, are widely regarded as a black-box (Veen 2011), lobbying focused on the Members of the European Parliament which had to negotiate amendments to the proposed data protection reform (Albrecht 2015: 119 ff.).

Topics of discussion were manifold and included a variety of demands: exemptions for pseudonymous data and industrial self-regulation instead of state regulation, loosening up the principle of informed consent, whether the Regulation should apply to an equal extent to public and private data processors, a reduction of the level of penalty payments, discussions on the introduction of the so-called *right to be forgotten*, the reintroduction of the so-called *anti-fisa clause*,<sup>13</sup> and many more topics (Ermer 2013; Dix et al. 2013). By the end of the deadline for tabling amendments in March 2013, the largest ever number of requests for amendments during an EU legislative process had been submitted: the competent Committee for Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE committee), under the lead of the

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<sup>13</sup>A preliminary draft of the Commission's proposal that was leaked in December 2011 included Article 42 which stipulated that data transfer from the EU to third-countries is only permitted on the basis of European law or international treaties. The transfer of data of European citizens, for example, by US corporations operating in the EU, to US American security authorities and secret services based on the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) hence, would have been explicitly prohibited, which is why it was referred to as the anti-fisa clause. However, the Commission removed the article from the final proposal due to intense pressure by the US government (Fontanella-Khan 2013), while the Parliament reintroduced it as a direct consequence of the Snowden revelations in form of Article 43a (Albrecht 2015: 139).

rapporteur, Jan Philipp Albrecht, had to craft a compromise text on the basis of 3999 requests for amendments (Albrecht 2015: 119 ff.). After a lengthy standstill, due to both the enormous lobbying in the EP and obstructions by member states in the Council, the revelations of the former National Security Agency (NSA) analyst Edward Snowden in June 2013 on the scale of mass surveillance by US intelligence services and by their global and European partners, provided the negotiations with new impetus (Reding 2013). Finally, the compromise text was backed with 49 votes in favor, 1 against and 3 abstentions in the LIBE committee in October 2013 and adopted by the European Parliament with 621 votes in favor, 10 against, and 22 abstentions in March 2014. Trilogue negotiations started after the adoption of the Council of Minister's position in June 2015 and were concluded in December 2015. Accordingly, the result of the trilogue negotiations was adopted by Parliament and Council in April 2016. Regulation 2016/679 will apply directly in all member states from 25 May 2018.

Its appropriateness, however, to meet the challenges imposed by technology, while enabling the free flow of data, and to harmonize data protection legislation across the EU, is assessed differently by observers and data protection scholars. Measured by the wording, the final text follows rather the Council's approach than the Parliament's or the Commission's. The latter's aim to centralize the specification of controversial data protection issues in the Commission (Hornung 2012; Schwartz 2015: 337 ff.) was replaced by around 70 opening clauses as a leeway for member states to implement national legislation in relevant areas and a shift of power towards the European Data Protection Board (EDPB) to be founded (De Hert and Papakonstantinou 2016: 180). Criticisms concern, for example, that the goal of the Regulation, to harmonize European data protection legislation, was missed due to the enormous number of opening clauses, and that the Regulation does not affect current and upcoming technological developments such as cloud computing, the Internet of things, and big data (Privacy Forum 2016). Following the adoption of the Regulation, a review of the e-Privacy Directive, including a public consultation process was initiated by the Commission.

## Conclusion

Meanwhile, European data protection politics can look back on an eventful history of several decades. From its humble beginnings in several member states' domestic legislation over the first steps of internationalization and anchorage on the European level to the recent General Data Protection Regulation, a trend towards more convergence regarding the establishment of data protection as a fundamental right and subsequent legislations throughout Europe seems evident.

As political scientists, however, by going beyond the description of laws enacted and their history, we should analyze the causes and effects of regulatory activity and the specific temporal constellation of actors, beliefs, interests, and institutions that have made policy change possible. Political science and its several subdisciplines

offer a rich variety of theories and frameworks, which promise a comprehensive understanding of policy processes and of policy change.

The presented overview over the state of research and the evolution of European data protection politics has demonstrated that over the period of decades, policy change has indeed occurred. Furthermore, it was shown that data protection is an intense public policy problem which involves goal disagreement, technical disputes and a high number of individual as well as corporate actors from several levels of government, interest groups, and research institutions. At the same time, the existing literature on European data protection politics provides anecdotal evidence for several of the propositions of existing explanatory models, e.g., the existence of belief-based coalitions as the Advocacy Coalition Framework hypothesizes. External events such as developments in information technologies or the creation of the European Internal Market have evidently played a significant role in these policy processes, too. Finally, the evolving parameters of the European institutional framework and of the convoluted EU decision-making process have set specific conditions that have particularly affected long-term opportunity structures and short-term constraints and resources of policy participants. This latter aspect, however, draws our attention to the fact that—besides the political science and legal literature on European data protection politics—a profound understanding of the multi-level institutional structure of the EU and its decision-making process is also of utmost importance. Therefore, any analysis of European data protection politics should build upon the rich political science literature from European Studies and European Integration, which in turn may also benefit from the findings (Rozbicka 2013). This is even more important at a time, when the EU has an enormous and ongoing political crisis.

Finally, as economy and politics are increasingly relying on the processing of personal data or data that could be related to persons, it remains to be said that data protection politics will certainly remain on the policy agendas of any industrialized country—and thus, continue to deliver political disputes worth being studied by political scientists.

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# Chapter 4

## Internet Policy and German Copyright Regulation. A Subsystem Perspective to Assess Changes in Interest Group Dynamics and Policy-Making

Stefan Lindow

### Introduction

The Internet entails transformative power for many areas of society: social life, state power, and business models (see Consalvo and Ess 2013). The media was the first to be confronted with the new reality of ubiquitous computing and accessibility of information that undermined the physical needs of exclusion rights that is the hard copy (Dolata and Schrape 2013). Different actors either demanded protection of established business setups or pushed for the dissolution of prohibitive regulations. At the locus of discussions was the question of rights of usage of information, e.g., the *copy rights* (Lindow 2017). Through social changes, the Internet is expected to cause far-reaching changes to a number of policies, whether due to its international orientation that renders national law an unsuitable mechanism for regulation or due to the application of the Internet's logic of openness on a number of domains (Braman 2013).

Until recently, politics concerning the transformative impact of the worldwide network were termed *Internet governance*, which favored a problem-solving approach. But lately, studies attempting to explain policies causally have been conducted. Fritz (2013) engages in the comparison of four policy processes on different issues including copyright. Scheffel (2016) sets out to identify Internet policy as a subsystem, but strangely avoids copyright issues. In fact, as often as copyright is counted as being part of the Internet governance or of an Internet policy subsystem, research seldom can find or establish the empirical interconnection between copyright and other Internet-related topics (Benkler 1999; Dutton and Peltu 2009; Hösl and Reiberg 2016). But how can we explain that a sector so central to the digital revolution appears negligible to Internet policy?

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This chapter tackles the question of the development of German copyright policy in terms of its subsystemic integration and dynamics. On the one hand, the German case is a typical one, where reactions to Internet impact on *continental* style of copyright regulation can be examined. On the other hand, the German case is possibly one of a few, exceptional ones, because Germany is especially influential in uploading policies to the European level. First, an introduction into subsystem theory is provided. Second, it is shown that during second half of the twentieth century, a single, independent copyright subsystem existed (“*Urheberrecht*”). In the third section, I discuss the research on internationalization of copyright politics to disprove dissolution of national copyright policy. Forth, I assess the state of research on the questions of copyrights’ subsumption or integration into an Internet policy subsystem. Fifth, since I rule out either international or Internet policy subsumption of Internet politics, I show that the change in copyright subsystemic dynamics fit the description of an adversarial subsystem type.

## The Theoretical Framework of Policy Subsystems

Public policy research investigates the reasons and results of state policy-making. Existing theoretical frameworks like the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) or Punctuated Equilibrium Hypothesis focus on more than single policies, even though they might be used differently. The central unit of investigation and explanation is the dynamics in the so-called Policy Subsystems,

wherein interested policy specialists—including legislators, agency personnel, interest group representatives, scientists, members of the press, and others—engage in evaluating and attempting to influence the course of policy in the relevant issue domain (Jones and Jenkins-Smith 2009: 37).

It has to be noted that the scope of a subsystem has to be empirically determined. It is the actors who ultimately set the issues and their relevance, when they “regard themselves as a semi-autonomous community who share a domain of expertise” (Sabatier 1998: 111). Subsystems are the regular patterns of interaction around a “given policy topic” (Jenkins-Smith et al. 2014), which can be conflictual as well as collaborative (Weible 2008).

Nohrstedt and Weible (2010) highlight five characteristics of subsystems: (1) an uncountable number of parts that interact in nontrivial ways with a topical focus that allows the analyst to distinguish between integrated actors and outsiders. An established subsystem is marked by (2) a stable membership of actors with specialized organizations and interest groups as well as subunits within institutions (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1999: 136). (3) An existing “mature” subsystem has the authority to make decisions or implementation choices to a certain degree despite their vertical nestedness within other subsystems. (4) The same holds true for horizontal interdependence between two subsystems. Finally, (5) policy subsystems undergo “periods of stasis, incremental change, and major change” (Nohrstedt and Weible 2010: 8).

Policy subsystems exist when interested actors *interact* around a certain shared issue (even though problem definition and proposed solutions may vary widely) over a longer time span. Here, they not only try to influence policy but (at least some actors) actually possess the authority to make decisions. Policy change might be absent or may also come through incremental, minor changes. From time to time, a subsystem is punctuated by major policy change (Jenkins-Smith et al. 2014; 201f). The former is well known as the *modus vivendi* of policy subsystems. The latter, the major policy change, is the explanandum of the most recognized theories of the policy process like the ACF (Sabatier and Weible 2014). According to the ACF, the existence and characteristics of a policy subsystem have an impact on the policy-making of the specific domain because actors within this domain form more or less coordinated *Advocacy Coalitions* on the basis of their beliefs (Jenkins-Smith et al. 2014). So while theories using this concept were originally meant to explain single major changing policies, the policy subsystems capture a lot more interaction. The following three theoretical questions have to be addressed:

1. How does a subsystem come into being? To answer this, the literature shows two paths to be possible: Of course, policy subsystems may come into being when a new issue is perceived, engrossed by dispersed actors and, finally, in their interaction spelled out into problems, solutions, and policies (Sabatier 1998; Sabatier and Weible 2007). But at the same time dozens of subsystems exist, where dissatisfied old minority groups or new actors decide to take action against dominant actor coalitions who protect a beneficial status quo. Mobilization and exploitation, defection and conflict may then foster the emergence of a new subsystem out of the struggles within older ones (McCool 1995; Jenkins-Smith et al. 2014). Clearly, I argue, copyright was the locus of a policy subsystem long before the Internet. Anticipating this, Haunss and Hofmann even forecast copyright politics to have a huge impact on other Internet-related policies (2015).
2. What are its connections to other subsystems? Here, the literature indicates that policy subsystems do not exist within a vacuum. First, of course, there are a multitude of other subsystems, some of them with neighboring issues that imply interconnectedness and interdependence of developments, even more so when subsystem issues overlap. Second, it is not unusual that subsystems are nested within content-wise similar but geographically bigger subsystems, which lead to mutual coordination (Zafonte and Sabatier 1998). This holds for federal systems, where a national subsystem encompasses several state-level systems, or for the supranational level (e.g., European Union).
3. How may a subsystem be shaped? Subsystems can be very different: Of the hundreds of actors within a subsystem, it is expected that most of them can be subsumed into two to four coalitions, but there can be more or even only one dominant coalition (Jenkins-Smith et al. 2014). Resources, especially the power to take authoritative decisions, can be distributed in many ways; many forms of cooperation and conflict are also conceivable. If theoretical expectations are to

**Table 4.1** “A summary of three ideal types of policy subsystems” (Weible 2008: 622)

	Unitary subsystems	Collaborative subsystems	Adversarial subsystems
1. Coalitions	Single coalition with high intra-coalition belief compatibility and high intra-coalition coordination	Cooperative coalitions with intermediate inter-coalition belief compatibility and high inter- and intra-coalition coordination	Competitive coalitions with low inter-coalition belief compatibility and high intra-coalition and low inter-coalition coordination
2. Policy images	Single	Reconciled	Debated
3. Degree of centralization (of authority) and interdependence (of subsystem)	Authority is centralized and interdependence with other subsystems is ignored	Authority is decentralized, fragmented across policy subsystems, or both. Coalitions share access to authority.	Authority is centralized but fragmented within the policy subsystem, fragmented across policy subsystems, or both. Coalitions compete for access to authority
4. Venues (activated or used by actors)	Coalition influences decisions in one or two amiable venues (legislature, agencies)	Coalitions use a variety of venues, including ones based on consensus-based institutions	Coalitions seek to influence decisions in any amiable venue (courts, legislatures, agencies)
5. Policy designs	Policies distribute benefits to single coalition	Policies are voluntary, win–win, and flexible in means	Policies are coercive, win–lose, and prescriptive in means

be formulated, a simplification to the core distinction of subsystems is needed—just as the typology of Weible (2008) provides.

Weible fuses the distinction of one to many coalitions as well as the idea of conflict and cooperation into three types of subsystems: a unitary one, dominated by a single coalition, and two multi-coalition types, a collaborative subsystem, where the opposing advocacy coalitions cooperate, and an adversarial one, where multiple advocacy coalitions compete. These three ideal types of subsystems differ in five dimensions, as you can see in Table 4.1.

## Well Established: The German Copyright Subsystem

So what is copyright? In Germany, it protects automatically “literary, scientific and artistic works if they constitute personal intellectual creations,” which means that the work must be novel or unique, creative, being original and individual to the author (Klett et al. 2009: 60). Obvious candidates for protection are literature, music, and films but also pantomimes or dance performances and architecture or



technical illustrations can be subject to copyright. “Protection” means that the law grants authors non-transferable ownership rights that encompass all “exclusive right[s] to exploit his work in any tangible form or to communicate his work to the public in any intangible form” (Klett et al. 2009: 62). At the same time, the exclusiveness is limited, allowing or even coercing a number of legal licenses for social or public uses, e.g., public libraries, schools, and higher education or reproduction (e.g., copying) for private use in exchange for remuneration.

For the Internet researcher, copyright regulations are quite old, even though it is considered a very young area of law (Dommann 2014): In German states, initial copyright laws were enacted in the 1830s because printers and publishers demanded protection from unauthorized reprints (Dommann 2014). Empirically, these rights were given to authors and printing presses that later developed into an economic sector of publishing companies, which made the *Urheberrecht* a profitable policy for the rights holders. In the early twentieth century, Great Britain and Germany are seen as the prototypes of different concepts to regulate the dissemination of and access to cultural works (Ellins 1997: 74ff): Great Britain embraced a license-based *copy* right based on economic incentives, while the German approach built on the idea of moral rights of originators, which in the 1960s was equated with their right to exploit, being thus superior to any “related rights” of rights holders (e.g., commercial enterprises like publishers).

Along with the first laws on *Urheberrecht* in 1870s, the development of such regulation was delegated to a national agency of justice, the later ministry of justice in the Weimar Republic, which was succeeded by the Federal Ministry of Justice of the Federal Republic of Germany. For the later German state, it was even written into the constitution that *Urheberrecht* issues were to be regulated nationally. Because of this, reforms in this field were prepared within the German Federal Ministry of Justice, e.g., a distinct departmental unit of subdivision 3 (commercial law).

Driven by new methods of copying and dissemination of cultural works and interrupted by the Second World War, debates on reform were present from the 1920s to the 1960s. From the parliamentary side, a permanent committee on patent law and industrial property rights was established in 1949, reconvened for the latter and *Urheberrecht* in 1953, but dissolved in 1957. Since then, *Urheberrecht* is managed in the permanent committee of justice, possibly is due to the mirroring strategy of federal ministerial jurisdictions by the German federal parliament. The only, but notable exemptions are two short-term subcommittees to the committee of justice, named just “*Urheberrecht*,” and to the committee of cultural affairs, named “*Urheberrecht und Kulturfragen*” (author’ rights and questions of culture). Both were set up in 1963 to find common ground for disputed propositions of the bill meant to reconnect German policy to international treaties. Despite this effort, it was a conference committee between the Bundestag and Bundesrat that later reached an agreement accepted unanimously in the two chambers. The conflict was then settled for more than 30 years, with only minor changes to technical details. In 2008, the then head of the *Urheberrecht* division in the Federal Ministry of Justice, Elmar Hucko, described policy-making as “so deprived from party

politics and public discourse that it was negotiated cross partisan and by judicial experts” (my translation, Hucko 2008: 129). Experts not only designed the uncontroversial bills of the late twentieth century. The *Urheberrecht* division of the ministry of justice also drafted the bills of 1932, 1934, 1954, and 1959 for the reform that eventually came as late as 1965. Thirdly, the German judiciary, split into subfields of law since 1949, centralized its legal expertise and decision-making authority within a single senate for *Urheberrecht* (and patent law) in the Federal Court of Justice. It is the instance of last authority of the three-tiered judiciary.

On the side of non-governmental actors, individuals published several draft bills in 1928 and another draft in 1938 came from the Academy of German Law, a fascist, legal think-tank. In the 1950s, following the end of the fascist regime in Germany, the draft bills of the ministries were internally debated with legal experts, while interest groups could only demand information (Maracke 2003). Interest groups were not asked for their opinion until 1963, after the ministry of justice consulted with five other federal ministries, including the Ministry for Family Affairs in 1961. Even the Federal Court of Justice did file an opinion on the matter.<sup>1</sup> The interest groups at that time resemble the kind of interests that are present and active today: the music industry with *Bundesverband der Phonographischen Wirtschaft e.V.*, the collecting society for music rights, GEMA, the book publishers and sellers (*Börsenverein*), the authors’ association, the universities association (*Hochschulverband*), the public sector broadcasting association (ARD), and so forth (Maracke 2003: 114–125, 146–150, 185–190; Günnewig 2004: 143–210). They had and still have access to ministerial bureaucrats who prepare legislation then and now. Interest groups also continue to be invited to parliamentary hearings (Maracke 2003: 234–256; Günnewig 2004: 187, 208).

Apart from the interest groups, legal scholars provide scientific expertise since the 1870s. These scholars constitute a subdiscipline within civil law scholarship, whose proclaimed mission is to balance out a three-folded interest constellation of originators, rights-exploiters, and the public (see below; Dommann 2014). Economic expertise in this area was not available until the 1970s and 1980s and even though a new subfield of economic research has rapidly grown since then, it is seldom consulted in German national legislation processes. Law experts dominate this field.

Content wise, the 15-year intense struggle<sup>2</sup> of the 1950s and 1960s codified mostly what was in many ways already established or developed by juridical precedent (Schröder 1989: 37). With liberal ministers at the helm almost throughout the whole period, the ministerial bureaucrats established a liberal, rule-of-law image of author rights, “bringing the protection of property to perfection” (Schröder 1989: 29). The 1965 law cut many provisions that limited exclusive property rights for the common good. Instead, many once free possibilities of usage were now

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<sup>1</sup>A possibility that was taken from the court later in the course of fights over hierarchy between it and the federal constitutional court.

<sup>2</sup>It took over 30 years, if we include the different attempts since the Weimarian Republic.

subject to licensing and commission. Copying of texts and taping music from the radio was allowed, but producers of technology for such purposes were to pay fees. Economic interests won out in a merger of economic and moral rights of authors, which ensured that certain rights—which until then were often bought by economic actors—were now unassignable (Ellins 1997: 68ff). All this was accompanied by the creation of a monopoly for secondary exploitation of creative works (and mandatory licensing), which was given to the private collecting societies, which had become more prevalent since the turn of the century. In terms of content, the overall picture is stable since 1965: Until the beginning EU harmonization in the late 1990s, only minor changes in a limited number of bills were enacted.

The *Urheberrecht* doubtlessly constitutes a policy subsystem. Authority to make decisions is vested within specialized institutions and a closely connected, integrated, and self-contained community of (law) experts and interest groups are long lasting and engaged for long time periods. The actors engage constantly in decision-making, which is why these different actors may be understood as advocacy coalitions. It has become common to speak of three groups of interests: (1) originators who vouch for a personal moral right to their works, an inalienable right to change, exploit, or give away their cultural work. (2) Rights holding parties that engage in economic exploitation (publishers, music labels, etc.) generally understood as economic or industrial interests. These economic interests want to strengthen contractual relations with originators and consumers, while at the same time having their service protected through “neighboring rights.” (3) The common good, often equated with consumers or users, which has to be represented by the state (see for example Krujatz 2012). Günnewig recognized the new power of producers of electronic devices or services and their interests in the new market by defining them as economic *users*. Certainly, their interests are not new, but date at least back to the 1950s because of questions of allowed copying or even the early 1900s (Maracke 2003: 497f; Vogt 2004). Even more, this categorization at the end of the chain of production and consumption should not expect their interests to be equal with its very end, the end user (Lindow 2017). However, in the 1950s the originators and rights holders were the most active players and were also dominant throughout the second half of the twentieth century. We cannot provide prove here and now, whether they constituted two cooperating Advocacy Coalitions or one huge but dominant coalition. But we know that this fully mature policy subsystem has come under siege through external developments: internationalization on the one hand, and the rise of new issues on the other.

## Internationalization

### *Toward Worldwide Harmonization*

As detailed above, *Copy rights* is a rather old topic of regulation, dating to the early nineteenth century in Germany, with international treaties arising in the 1880s. During this period, there have been numerous reforms, both minor and major, and over the decades, times of contestation succeeded times of low controversy and vice versa (May and Sell 2006). The first international treaty, the Berne convention, upheld such rights by mutually recognizing them, and as a result property rights on cultural works spread internationally and became increasingly harmonized (Löhr 2010).

After only a few, minor developments in the 1980s, harmonization within the European Union as well as worldwide moved forward in 1990s. Internationally, expanding US industries from patent-dependent sectors like software, chemistry, and pharmaceuticals as well as the copyright-based sector of music and film were successful lobbyists. They were able to implement an understanding of copyrights as intellectual property so it could be treated as a commodity (May and Sell 2006: 153ff). These Trade-Related aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPs) became part of the World Trade Organization in 1994 and fostered an unprecedented pushback from civil society and developing countries (Fernandez and Meier 2012). Succeeding international agreements were far less industry-friendly, like the WPPT and WCT in 1996.<sup>3</sup> Other treaties were even abandoned because of civil protest (like ACTA, see below) or are still under heavy political fire (such as TTIP<sup>4</sup> in 2015/16). Since TRIPs, all kinds of actors engage in multilevel venue shopping to serve their interests (Sell 2011).

In the 1980s rulings from the European Court of Justice, which initially protected national law from European interference, paved the way for the European Commission to propose harmonization measures for the European Community/Union member states (Ellins 1997: 242ff). Throughout the 1990s, an extensive EC participation process led to an encompassing *Directive on the harmonisation of certain aspects of copyright and related rights in the information society* (InfoSoc) in 2001. Nonetheless, even as the Member States seem to be in agreement about the need of uniformity of rules in the European market (Litzo-Monnet 2006), the InfoSoc Directive was equipped with a long list of exemptions to the proclaimed right of reproduction (copying) and of communication to the public (e.g., putting something online) that resembles a list of national copyright traditions. But procedurally, the EC was successful “to reap new powers for the Community and to give IPR [intellectual property rights] within the Community a new momentum” (Fernandez and Meier 2012: 481). With some directives in

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<sup>3</sup>WCT: WIPO Copyright Treaty; WPPT: WIPO Performances and Phonograms Treaty. WIPO: World Intellectual Property Organisation (of the United Nations).

<sup>4</sup>Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership.

place, the European Court of Justice became the address for even more demands, and Brussels European Union bureaucrats and parliamentarians became another resource for authoritative decision. Growing numbers of EC initiatives and their successful adoption and implementation prove that in addition to the German *Urheberrecht* and other national copyright subsystems there is now a European copyright subsystem (see Fig. 4.1). The same holds true for international level, where the trade treaties CETA and TTIP drafts planned to install a jurisdiction for stakeholders to sue for their rights (Horten 2012).

### *National Leeway*

This debate overlooks the fact that national policy-making is still relevant. First, the implementation process had its national moments: The implementation law was introduced into the German parliament only a month before the general election (Deutsche Bundestag 2002). While it is in principle possible to fast-track the enactment of a law, the fact that it had to be reintroduced after the election and needed another year of negotiation points to unforeseen or underestimated conflicts (Günnewig 2004: Chap. 8).

To be sure, similar things are happening in other EU-member states. First, not every country has implemented the different EU directives.<sup>5</sup> Luxemburg still has not implemented the 15-year-old InfoSoc Directive. Second, far from formal implementation, the realization of EU rules is a question of empirical research (Westkamp 2007; Topal 2014). Third and not far from this notion, there are several voluntary aspects to the InfoSoc Directive and the later Directive 2004/48/EC on the enforcement of intellectual property rights (IPRED), to name just two. Fourth and last: the EU implementation database reveals that transposition to national law is not without considerable effort. Sweden, for example, adjusted its laws concerning the InfoSoc Directive and the IPRED Directive several times. Austria changed laws several times only for the former, while the latter was also the subject of several national legislation processes in 16 of 28 member states.

Second, European legislation, most of all the InfoSoc Directive, left considerable flexibility for national policy (Westkamp 2007). Consequentially, several laws were introduced that reinforced old singular measures or even implemented new measures that were not part of any EU Directive: the §52a for education and research benefiting schools and universities (2003, 2014), the *Leistungsschutzrecht* (2013) aimed to strengthen publishers against the news aggregation of Google, or the Green Open Access in 2013 strengthening scientific authors over publishers (see Fig. 4.1).

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<sup>5</sup>Check the National Implementation Measures within Eur-Lex, the European Union Legislation Database on the stated Directives. Last access in May 2016.

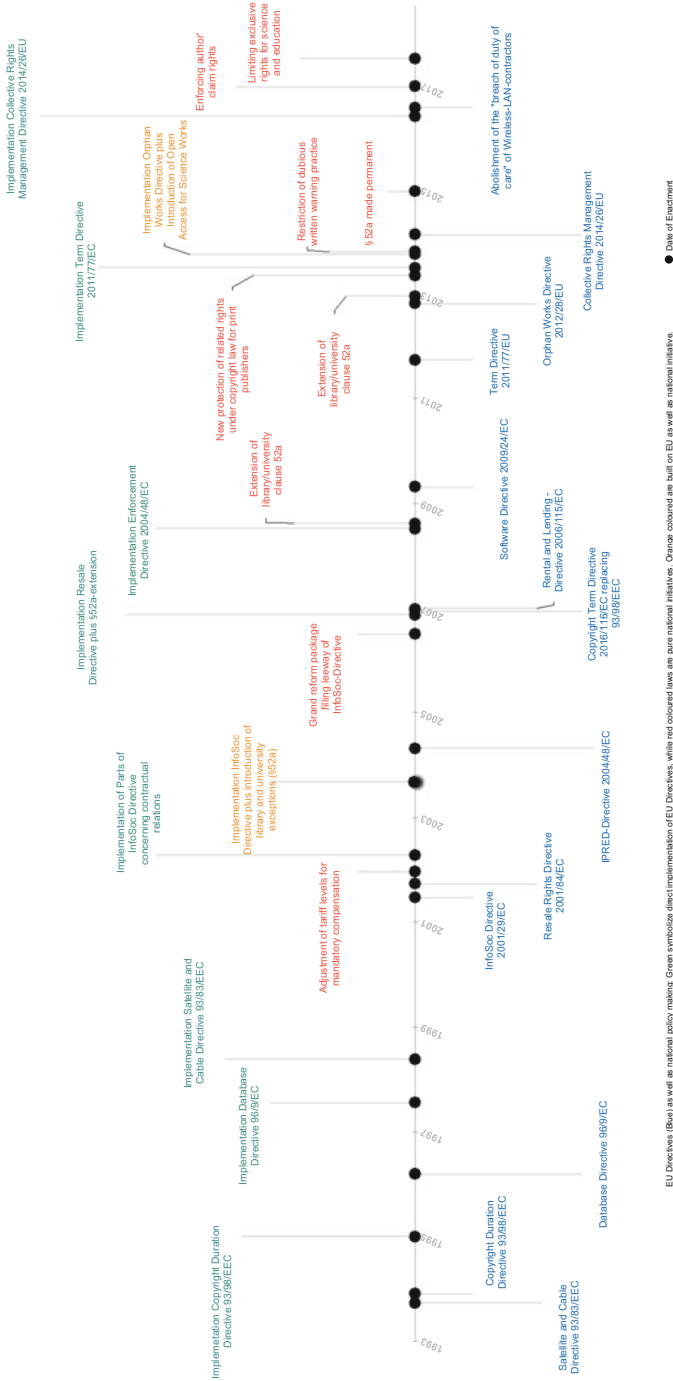


Fig. 4.1 Copyright legislation of the European Union and Germany since 1990

Due to this, Copyright policy-making in Germany was difficult: The implementation of the obligatory parts of the Enforcement Directive was not only late, but restrictive provisions added in the German national policy process were reversed after heavy protests by activist groups (Fritz 2013). The conflict heated up when in the footsteps of the encompassing reform packages of 2003 and 2007, a third reform package (*Der 3. Korb*—"the third basket") was announced in 2007 and postponed until negotiations took place from 2010 to 2012. Here, after industries retreated from another negotiation round in September 2012, the responsible minister called the package off (Kaess 2012), only to replace it with four smaller laws that were adopted by parliament within the 12 months that were left before another general election. And it was only after this incident, which the three provisions mentioned above were enacted. The §52a had been introduced 2003 a new rule concerning library copy and accessibility rights, but publishers successfully argued for a terminability of this rule. Only in 2014, after three extensions, was it made permanent (Lindow 2017). In the aftermath of the reform of 2003, universities and large research organizations pushed for the "Transition to the Electronic Open Access Paradigm" (Berlin Declaration 2003). When in 2007 the next comprehensive reform came about, an Open Access paragraph was again—against the wish of the German second chamber—postponed and was not implemented until 2013. Here again, Germany's national situation differs from what is in place at European level. Since science organizations in Germany are public, many pure science organizations are co-financed by their resident states, as are the bulk of the universities. Because of this, the federal states as their financiers, as well as the public science fund and the ministry of science and education became interested actors. And the publishers new neighboring right, the *Leistungsschutzrecht* for newspaper publisher, had been introduced into legal discussion in 2008 at latest (Kauert 2008). It was the overall lobbying goal of the German publishers since then, being fulfilled in 2013.

Again, there was considerable movement at European level. European Union Directives introduced a permanent layer of authority but their content makes exceptions for national policies. This leeway is of course a mainstay of European Union policies, which leave considerable space to implementation deviation. A national *Urheberrecht* subsystem is thus now nested within a European Copyright Subsystem.

## A New Internet Policy Subsystem

### *The New Logic*

Beginning in the late 1990s, a debate on Internet Governance (IG) articulated the need for a harmonized policy approach to all kinds of Internet issues. IG has been defined by practitioners as "the development and application by Governments, the

private sector and civil society, in their respective roles, of shared principles, norms, rules, decision-making procedures and programs that shape the evolution and use of the Internet” (The Working Group on Internet Governance [WGIG] 2005). Accordingly, scholars provided a list of topics and engaged in research concerning international harmonization and power shifts. These lists were often structured to indicate differences. Benkler proposed three layers: physical infrastructure, logical infrastructure, and content (Benkler 1999). Dutton introduced a perspective of ecologies of games, which classifies three categories of “areas focused on particular types of outcome (. . .): internet-centric, which is intrinsically focused on the internet; internet-user centric, where rules need to focus on users; and non-internet centric, where rules are shaped by policies in wider related—but distinct—sectors, such as by copyright” (Dutton and Peltu 2009: 395) or freedom of expression. In each area of Internet governance, issues at stake, chosen venues and engaged actors differ, as does the “game” that shapes Internet Governance.

More recently, these distinct topics are said to constitute an interrelated set of actors and issues that is an emergent policy subsystem of Internet regulation (Fritz 2013; Hösl and Reiberg 2016; Busch et al. 2017a). Encompassing and coordinated political processes and policy approaches concerning the transformative impact of the worldwide network were demanded by activists for nearly a decade, if not longer,<sup>6</sup> What is known: Since the entry of the German pirate party in 2008, every major political party has a spokesperson for Internet policy, the so-called netzpolitische Sprecher (Scheffel 2016). Internet policy interest groups were formed in 2010 at latest (“Digitale Gesellschaft”), while existing interest groups came to adopt the term of “Netzpolitik.” On the state side of the subsystem, the development is more recent. In 2010, the German parliament set up a consulting Enquete Commission on digital matters, which in its final report called for the establishment of a distinct standing committee for Internet affairs. In 2014, this committee was established but was cut off from the authoritative “leading” function on Internet-related issues and limited to advisory activities (Schwanholz and Jakobi 2016). A federal government *digital agenda* was established in 2013 and is still criticized as having “let everybody down” (Greis 2014). Major institutional changes date to 2013, when the Ministry for Transport was rebranded with the addition “and digital infrastructure” indicating their responsibility for broadband dissemination, while at the same time the Ministry for Economy affairs did not only become responsible for the governments digital agenda, but doubled its subunits in its advent and rededicated its division to “digital and innovation policy” (Pohle et al. 2016). Not only two, but five different ministries have leading responsibility for topics related to the Internet: cyber security is situated within the Ministry of the Interior as well as its international aspect with the Foreign Office (a ministry), and privacy joined copyright in the Ministry of Justice in 2013. Additionally, an agency to operate below the ministerial level was brought into discussion by the social

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<sup>6</sup>The Weblog [netzpolitik.org](http://netzpolitik.org) is the name-giving locus of the internet-policy-related activism in Germany.



democratic Minister for Economic Affairs in 2016 (BMWi 2016). A national institute for the Internet was also put out to tender in 2015 (BMBF 2015).

This fragmentation of authority on Internet Governance topics within Germany questions the very existence of a subsystem for Internet policy. Nor is its name in the public discussion, “Netzpolitik,” used within the government program or institutions. Does a broad image of the policy, its problems and solutions, exist regardless of whether it is a single dominant, a debated, or reconciled one?

The study of Hösl and Reiberg (2016) assesses patterns of media coverage on Internet issues along with their co-occurrence with political entities. They recognize 27 topics related to the Internet, of which data protection and privacy, domain-name-administration, content control by access providers, its security and trustworthy communication as well as competition are the most central topics of Internet-related policy discussion on the media. Surprisingly, *Urheberrecht* is not a closely connected topic and not very controversial in media coverage (Hösl and Reiberg 2016: 328–330),<sup>7</sup> even though policy-making was large, frequent, and contentious (Lindow 2017). Even more interesting, Hösl and Reiberg’s findings on the use of the signifier for the alleged subsystem, “Netzpolitik,” show that it is not used as pervasively as the research literature suggested. Instead, it is closely connected to a certain category of actors, the civil society activists and the pirate party, and their perspective on the matter (Hösl and Reiberg 2016: 334). Another study of Scheffel (2016) maps three distinct interrelated cases of policy-making on Internet-related issues, but he wrongly defines the boundaries of the system by himself instead of assessing them empirically. Remarkably, Scheffel’s definition of *Netzpolitik* simply resembles the abovementioned actor perspective. *Urheberrecht* stands out thanks to its similar position as a secondary or even tertiary topic to *Netzpolitik* in any of these categorizations.

This marginal position of German *Urheberrecht* regulation is astonishing since a Copyright reform—mostly moderate demands but at rare times even the abolishment of any regulation (Fritz 2013: 91)—was the founding issue of the pirate party in Sweden in 2006 and was still a major demand in the program of its German offspring (Haunss 2013).<sup>8</sup> Copyright was a topic for two Enquete Commissions on new media or Internet in the 1990s and early 2010s in German parliament, too. And finally, in 2012 mass protests throughout Europe were able to change votes within the European Parliament, resulting in the dumping of international treaties ACTA, which was supposed to strengthen copyright enforcement on the Internet. These protests were widely received as being connected to the pirate party (Haunss 2013). It seems that copyright is more political than other research indicates and at times important in Internet-related policy discussion, while at the same time not always terribly central.

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<sup>7</sup>This may or may not be due to the limited time span of the data set of only up to 2011, since activists claim the year 2012 as the climax of the “Urheberrechtsdebatte” (copyright debate).

<sup>8</sup>Even more, the only pirate party member of the European parliament, the German Julia Reda, was rapporteur for the newest European copyright initiatives in 2015.

## *Interdependence Instead of Subsumption*

The solution to this puzzle is quite simple: Since 1965, *Urheberrecht* was a single subsystem on its own, it never stopped being a subsection of national politics despite internationalization and *Netzpolitik*. But such a subsystem is never fully independent, because subsystems are interdependent with other subsystems, nested within similar systems on higher levels like the EU (see section “[Internationalization](#)”) or subsystems with a larger scope. Moreover, Jones and Jenkins-Smith (2009) see subsystems as being linked by policy entrepreneurs and through their relations across subsystems into larger topical clusters. How is *Urheberrecht* connected to Internet issues?

Fritz showed that questions of blocking *individual* Internet access intertwined with copyright issues during a contentious policy process in the late 2000s (Fritz 2013: 171–189), but has not been on the national agenda since then. From the 1970s onwards, industry interests pushed for stronger enforcement of “their” intellectual property, but their export-securing strategy was soon directed at online copyright infringements, e.g., against file sharing and downloads (May and Sell 2006). Since 2006, a contentious policy process in France was circling around the idea of “three strikes” against copyright infringers, that is an instrument of increasing punishment by sending warnings, curbing Internet connections, temporary access blocking or even cutting Internet access (Breindl and Briatte 2013; Fritz 2013: 117, 172). This debate rose to European level (Breindl and Briatte 2013) and diffused to Great Britain and Germany (Fritz 2013), where civil rights groups who employed economic, technological, and civil rights arguments countered it. Most prominent were allegations arguing that the result would have been complete surveillance of Internet traffic. In Germany, this debate coincided with the attempt to block content that showed sexual abuse of children (Fritz 2013; Berghofer and Sell 2015). While this attempt became law in 2009, it was revoked in 2010 with no party in parliament defending it. Here, citizen groups and Internet service providers profited from successful framing enforcement measures as attempts to cut back civil rights (Fritz 2013: 171–189). While averted in Germany, industry-wide Internet blocking regulations now target copyright infringements in Denmark, France, Ireland, New Zealand, Spain, the UK and the USA (see Busch et al. 2017b). Even more, the German debate was not an internal Internet policy debate because the very attempt came from another subsystem, namely the family policy subsystem (Scheffel 2016: Chap. 4). As an external force, it linked the regulations of telecommunications policy and Internet policy as well as *Urheberrecht* for a brief moment, when questions of child protection, network neutrality, content blocking, and copyrights enforcement mingled (Fritz 2013).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>A similar interlinkage of copyright and telecommunication policy can be observed in the process of the EU Telecoms Package (Horten 2012).

## The Changes to *Urheberrecht* Subsystem Dynamics

### *The Impact of the Internet on Existing Policies*

But what developments come with the Internet that might cause changes in the German *Urheberrecht* subsystem? Protests in the online and offline world indicate a politicization of issues including intellectual property rights (Haunss 2013). This is because of today's ubiquitous computing that offers many possibilities to generate and share pictures, videos, and audio in combination. *Copyrights* are touched and infringed on constantly by anybody. As with many technological changes before, there is a political and regulatory reaction to the introduction of new devices (May and Sell 2006).

Many argue that with the countless possibilities for individuals to use digital devices to produce and share any kind of data, the very foundation of *Urheberrecht* is destroyed (Dolata and Schrape 2013: 17, 29). Information, as a cultural work can be understood in abstract form, is not a normal economic good since its usage does not exclude other consumers or diminish their consumption. The manufactured, real world medium—the printed page of a book, not its story; the pressed CD, not the music—is the vehicle of establishing exclusivity and rivalry, e.g., a private property that may be traded (Dolata and Schrape 2013). While the vinyl in the 1900s, the photocopier in the 1940s or the videotape recorder in the 1970s influenced the control over the dissemination of certain kinds of works but not of others, digital technology changes nearly everything protected by *Urheberrecht* (Vogt 2004; Maracke 2003).

This technological change *fragmented authority* in Germany in questions of copyright application (see Table 4.1). Simultaneously, it bound enforcement to another German subsystem, namely telecommunication policy. First, since the Internet enabled borderless file sharing, national regulation and other state-bound enforcement reached their limitation. What's more is that due to the digitalization strategies of university libraries, their financiers—the sixteen state governments—became not only stakeholders, but also an additional policy-making level. Second, cultural works were not bound anymore to any physical production of media (book printing, vinyl manufacturing) or the logistics of book and media traders, in which case these economic organizations were no longer available to the implementation of judicial decisions. Instead, new provisions against the traders and manufacturers of copying software and programs circumventing or destroying copy protection were implemented (2001/2003). At the same time, an exclusive right to “make available to the public” was enacted, so providers of file downloading sharing software could be targeted with law suits, like it was done with Napster in 2001 in the USA or the pirate bay in 2006/09. In 2009, in the context of implementing the European Enforcement Directive, right holders were allowed to ask Internet service providers to unveil the identity of individual contractors of Internet connections from which file sharing activity was assumed (Fritz 2013: 117). This and the aforementioned discussion on Internet blocking targeted Internet service providers,

who normally are part of a telecommunication policy subsystem, a system preoccupied with ensuring market competition for supplying high speed connectivity to the worldwide network (Horten 2012).<sup>10</sup>

### *Change to Adversarial Subsystem Dynamics*

But blocking individual Internet connections or filtering content for rights enforcement was not discussed before 2006 and has rarely been on the agenda since. So what did this incidence do to the subsystem of *Urheberrecht*, when—as has been argued—*Urheberrecht* policy neither has been migrated to a new level leaving the national level devastated nor was it subsumed under an Internet policy perspective. Instead, I follow Daniel Nohrstedt and Christopher Weible who theorized that the emergence or activation of new actors “from the same or a competing subsystem” (Nohrstedt and Weible 2010: 629) might change subsystem dynamics, certainly, if interdependence with other subsystems is growing or any outside event alters the existing balance of power or stirs up an older conflict. Consequently, we need to ask: What changed in the German *Urheberrecht* subsystem?

From a subsystem perspective, the most vicious aspects of change might be found in the categories of Weible (2008): belief compatibility, coordination, and coalitions; policy images; fragmentation of authority and interdependence, venues applied; policy design.

*Coalitions, Belief Compatibility, and Coordination* While it is common to divide actors in the field of Copyright along their position in the economic chain: originators, economic actors, and consumers, it is only in the wake of the second huge reform package that artist organizations managed to coordinate (Lindow 2017). In the area of science, 2003 marked the first time that scientific organizations coordinated in the *Wissenschaftsallianz* to foster Open Access policies and fight independent of broader attempts of civil society for specific copyright rules for science and education.

In the area of popular culture, rights holders spearheaded attempts to defend and expand copyrights and strengthened their enforcement tools on international, European, and national levels even more. Governing bodies tried to implement such requests and migrate the existing ideas of copyrights to the Internet. This attempt of conserving and expanding the analog policy regime into the information society was met by resistance not only from Internet service providers but also at times from the flourishing Internet economy, e.g., large, quasi monopolist web service providers like Google, Amazon, and Facebook or hardware manufacturers like Apple or Microsoft (Lindow 2017). While the Internet economy is at times

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<sup>10</sup>Here, linkages to other fields or subsystems develop: on the one hand privacy questions intermingle with copyright regulations as rights holders are trying to enforce their rights (Nietsch 2014).

associated with the civil society, the degree of belief compatibility is unclear. Apples' stand against digital rights management for digital music, for example, strengthened their already strong market position (Dolata 2013). Another group are law experts who sued in response to US laws and, in the wake of defeat, developed alternative copyright licenses, the Creative Commons, which deny many exclusive rights for a work and all processed work thereof (Dobusch and Quack 2009). Last and most important, academia and civil society founded new organizations to demand copyright reform enabling cultural participation (Dobusch and Quack 2009; Breindl and Briatte 2013; Fritz 2013; Haunss 2013). At times, these newly founded or others that partnered with Creative Commons organizations (CC) came into conflict with the narrow goal of legal development of the CC licenses, finally leading to organizational subdivision (Dobusch and Quack 2009). Other initiatives are more policy centered and short-termed such as the "AK Privatkopie" (Lindow 2017). Aside from this growing mobilization and coordination among actors, researchers tend to describe two adversarial sides confronting each other, with one side accusing the other of extremism (Dobusch 2015). But contrary to this construction of factions, the actors' interest crosscut normal categories (Dobusch and Quack 2009: 244), which makes Advocacy Coalitions an empirical question. Research, nonetheless, provides proof for contentious politics around *Urheberrecht* that grows in intensity and that encompasses more new and old actors. Dobusch and Schüßler (2014), for example, show that balancing deliberation among opposing actors was seldom and began to fade after 2009. The year 2012 saw mass protests around an international copyright enforcement treaty (Horten 2012) and the withdrawal of industrial interest groups from negotiations at national level (see below). Even without detailed empirics, it can be concluded that coordination among opposing actors ceased, while adversarial behavior increased.

*Policy Image* The predominant understanding is that along with the Internet the antagonism of two perspectives began, where a new perspective challenges the old. One side, a conservative coalition protects existing copyrights while trying to broaden enforcement instruments to compensate for the Internet's possibilities to share cultural work. This is reasoned by economic arguments that such rights would give economic incentives to protect today's culture to nurture its offspring and to innovate. There is a moral, natural law line of argument as well that sees the cultural work as directly derived from the originator. Here, the master frame sees copyrights as protection of "creation," while it "addresses copyright infringement as 'theft'" (Breindl and Briatte 2013). On the other side, activists bemoan a "second enclosure" of the common goods (Boyle 1997) and campaign for widespread openness to culture content (open content), free of charge and unblocked access to scientific works (open access), education (open education) and governmental as well as administrative documents (open government). Here, too, a utilitarian argument hopes for more innovation through less protective rights, which is accompanied by a natural law claim of higher individual development (Dobusch and Quack 2009). But such claims very often seem to be constructions of researchers: For instance, Haunss sees a new societal cleavage with two adversarial sides despite his

observation that “each group (of the many proponents on one side) propagates their own oppositional frames” (Haunss 2012: 338). Dobusch and Quack, too, argue that there are two “antagonistic interest groups,” while acknowledging internal divisions, diverging developments, and disputes (Dobusch and Quack 2009: 244f). Instead of one counter-image, “several contending frames to the hegemonic copyright discourse have emerged in the past decade, resulting in frequent protest over the direction taken at all levels of government over the issue of digital copyright reform, thereby threatening the policy monopoly of the entertainment sector” (Breindl and Briatte 2013: 33). It is in this moment of success that this counter-movement seems to have constructed a new image, managing to “[combine] civil liberties and economic frames, associating the protection of freedom of expression and privacy with Internet innovation and competitiveness” (Breindl and Briatte 2013: 49).

*Degree of Centralization and Interdependence* The Copyright policy subsystem described above was centralized in many aspects as was shown in section “[Well Established: The German Copyright Subsystem](#)”, but authority became fragmented into different levels and, to some degree, to different institutions (see sections “[Internationalization](#)” and “[A New Internet Policy Subsystem](#)”), but also interdependence with other subsystems grew (see again section “[A New Internet Policy Subsystem](#)” and “[The Impact of the Internet on Existing Policies](#)”).

*Venues* Along with the EU harmonization process that led to the InfoSoc Directive, a new layer<sup>11</sup> was introduced. New venues that were part of authoritative decisions within the European Union—the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Council as well as the European Court of Justice—were now used to influence policies (Litzo-Monnet 2006; Haunss and Kohlmorgen 2009; Fernandez and Meier 2012). But also on the national level, actors employed more venues than before. First, beginning with the mid-1990s interest groups have been engaging in trials, for example against digitization efforts of libraries, which lead to a high court decision implemented in 2007; or another decision in the same field from 2013 that was implemented in 2014 (Lindow 2017). Sometimes, lower courts or the BGH itself are passing such cases directly to the ECJ. Up to 2007, ministerial and parliamentary hearings were situated in the abovementioned German institutions, e.g., the Federal Ministry of Justice. But around 2010, the ministry of economic affairs engaged in talks with industrial interest groups on *Urheberrecht* “protection.”

*Policy Design* The many *Urheberrecht* reforms that have been enacted since the millennium differ in kind. The huge packages of 2003 and 2007 were meant to bring interest groups together and appease conflict. It was in this spirit that not only were the three abovementioned types of interests considered—the originators, the

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<sup>11</sup>Up to 1994 the international copyright subsystem, in which all the territorially more limited subsystems are nested in, did only secure the same national rights for foreign creative works (Ellins 1997).

exploiting rights holders, and the consumers—but all of them also managed either to push their positions into the legislation or prevent extreme setbacks for their positions (Lindow 2017). 2008 marked an exception, when the national implementation of the enforcement directive constituted the one-sided assertion of industrial exploitation interests (Fritz 2013: Sect. 5.3), which soon became the rule. Since 2007 there has been a third reform package in discussion, but—as has been mentioned already—it was abandoned in 2012 and replaced by numerous, small reform laws that can be seen as translation of interests of single, but different Advocacy Coalitions.

Cooperation thus ended and was succeeded by conflict that seems to have become the dominant mode of interaction since then. More intra-coalition coordination combined with less belief compatibility coupled with more venues and less centralized authority to make decisions—all this leaves the *Urheberrecht* subsystem in a state of adversarial dynamics.

## Summary

The goal of this article was to assess the existing research on the changes on copyright (“*Urheberrecht*”) regulation in Germany. What did change in *Urheberrecht* politics since the advent of the Internet? After introducing a subsystems perspective in section “[The Theoretical Framework of Policy Subsystems](#)”, I proved that *Urheberrecht* fits the criteria for a subsystem (3). In sections “[Internationalization](#)” and “[A New Internet Policy Subsystem](#)”, I showed that we cannot diagnose this subsystem’s complete internationalization as well as one might only see issue interlinkages with other subsystems instead of its integration into another subsystem. Instead, I argued in the last section that there was a change of type in the German *Urheberrecht* subsystem to new, adversarial dynamics.

These research results are preliminary because the development of Internet policy subsystem is—at best—empirically unfinished (Schwanholz and Jakobi 2016). So, while many authors await the emergence of the Internet policy subsystem, we have to acknowledge the existence of a national policy subsystem on *Urheberrecht*, which tightly integrates questions of information access and enforcement of copyrights. Being interlinked now, *Urheberrecht* may become subsumed under the *Netropolitik* or any other subsystem that may emerge, for example under the umbrella of a somewhat different *Digitalpolitik*. But because the theoretical connection leading to subsystem emergence is underdeveloped, we cannot make claims for future developments.

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**Part II**  
**Political Communication and Social Media:**  
**From Politics to Citizens**

# Chapter 5

## Parliaments 2.0? Digital Media Use by National Parliaments in the EU

Patrick Theiner, Julia Schwanholz, and Andreas Busch

### Introduction: Why Analyze Parliaments' Websites?

The digital transformation of politics has been a subject of academic discussion for the last two decades. By the end of the 1990s, the academic literature has highlighted the rising importance of parties' digital communication, the possibility of digital party organization, the establishment of online campaigning, citizens' digital participation, online law-making, online elections, and online protest (see Leggewie and Bieber 2003: 135). The authors predicted that study be a snapshot of a dynamic process that would only gain in speed and force. Further technological innovations have advanced digitalization, the latest change driven by the establishment of *digital social networks* since the turn of the millennium. Such networks allow for interactive communication and have quickly become an indispensable tool for political elites and citizens alike. The interactive opportunities offered by these social networks contrast against the long-established, but static, websites of parties, political institutions, and politicians. Before 2000, websites were understood to be technologically sophisticated, but this was not matched by a similar sophistication of content, with the result managing to simultaneously neglect and overburden the users (Leggewie and Bieber 2003: 137). However, current statistical data on Internet use in the European Union shows that access to, and use of, digital technology no longer constitutes a hurdle for a majority of the population in informing themselves about politics and communicating with political actors.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>An average of 80% of EU citizens were Internet users in 2015, ranging from a low of 60% in Bulgaria to a high of 98% in Luxembourg (Statista 2016).

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While some authors emphasize the risk of information overload due to the Internet, the digital provision of news through the websites of established political institutions—such as parliaments—can be a key component of structured information necessary for knowledgeable and engaged citizens.

As an institution often put at the centre of the political disengagement discourse, social media offer parliaments many new possibilities of engagement: a direct access to citizens not mediated by the media or parties, more direct access to a younger public, the possibility to react more quickly to news and events, the possibility to engage the public into a conversation and the possibility to target more specific issues (Leston-Bandeira and Bender 2013: 283).

Understood as the entire body of a legislative assembly, *parliaments* can make use of digital media to come into more direct contact with their citizens. The question is, however: Do parliaments actually use digital and social media to transport political information? Which communication tools are available on the websites of national parliaments, and how do these differ between countries? This chapter addresses these questions through a quantitative analysis of national parliaments' websites. While there has been some research on the websites of individual politicians, a similar comparative study on parliamentary digital media use does not yet exist.

The following sections will first survey the state of the research on websites of politicians and political institutions, with a special view towards the hypothesis of an increasing public disenchantment with politics and politicians. We then distinguish political participation from political communication and develop a three-dimensional model of the latter for the digital interactive spaces of Web 2.0 (section “[Political Communication and Participation in Web 2.0](#)”). Section “[Digital Media Use on Parliamentary Websites: An EU-Wide Comparison](#)” analyzes parliamentary websites, surveying the use of 14 distinct communication tools by legislative bodies of 28 EU member states in January 2015. We close by discussing whether our theoretical hypotheses are borne out by our empirical findings.

## **Websites of Politicians and Parliaments as Subjects of Empirical Analysis, Disenchantment with Politics, and the Need for Further Research**

Politicians' websites are no longer a new phenomenon, having constituted a natural element of political self-portrayal since the 1990s. Social scientists were examining politicians' websites as part of a larger trend in the literature on new information and communication technology (ICT). The establishment of parliamentary websites constitutes an important part of the development of ICT, yet they receive far less attention compared to the websites of individual representatives and other political actors. The first systematic attempt at understanding parliaments' role on the Internet was made by Coleman, Taylor, and van de Donk (1999). The authors mainly see the democratic potential in using the Internet, which should allow for an improved link between citizens and political elites. At the time, edited volumes on the relationship between

parliaments and citizens in Western Europe largely neglected the role digital media can play for political information and communication (see Norton 2002). Comparable empirical case studies conducted a decade later show that *new media* has been a major driving force of attempts and reforms towards greater parliamentary openness, visibility, and transparency (Leston-Bandeira 2012). The decade between these two studies has seen digital media develop and proliferate at a considerable pace, profoundly affecting the relationship between politics and society. Today's information society expects to be up-to-date on current events and topics anywhere, anytime. Politicians have responded to their constituents' expectations with their websites, where they inform citizens about themselves and their work, and where they can control their own narratives, at least partially escaping the dependence on national mass media to disseminate information (see Kunert 2016). This development has been repeatedly observed and analyzed by Zittel (2001, 2003, 2004, 2008). As Zittel shows in the cases of the US *House of Representatives*, the Swedish *Riksdag*, and the German *Bundestag*, the rapid establishment of political websites happened over less than ten years, and today practically every representative has their own website. However, there is significant variation between these sites in terms of the intensity of their use, and the differentiation of the methods of citizen engagement; this variation exists both on the national level, and when comparing across countries. Kunert (2016) presents an analysis of the websites of no fewer than 1818 members of the European Parliament and selected national parliaments (Austria, Germany, Ireland, the United Kingdom). She finds that members of the European Parliament use tools of information and transparency (blogs, Twitter posts) more often than representatives in national parliaments. Nevertheless, a 2010 survey shows a majority of members of the Bundestag acknowledging that "online communication is extremely useful [...] for their work as representatives, [...] irrespective of age and gender" (Tenscher and Will 2010: 513). And yet even in the 2000s, these same representatives still disseminated the bulk of their information through mass media, rather than directly targeting citizens (Zittel 2001: 274). Parliamentarians showed little willingness to truly connect with citizens, but saw online communication first and foremost as a channel for self-portrayal (see Hoecker 2002, Neuberger 2004).

With the rise of interactive and social media, this has changed dramatically. Leggewie and Bieber (2003:126) show that a notoriously underrated value of interactive media lies in making domestic communication between political elites and civil society easier and making decision-making processes based on direct democracy more likely. New technological possibilities create spaces for virtual political discussions. As a forum and marketplace of opinions, the Internet seems especially suited to facilitate new forms of an (electronic) public (see Tausch and Kollbeck 1998: 280–283). These positive expectations are partially checked by empirical data showing an increasing disenchantment with politics, or generally low interest in politics, among the populace of EU member states. Considering low levels of trust in national parliaments in EU member states,<sup>2</sup> every effort should

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<sup>2</sup>Shown empirically for around two thirds of member states, see Gabriel (2008: 207).

thus be made at connecting politics and citizens through communication, and this should not be left to parliamentarians and parties alone. As Sarcinelli (2011: 70–72) summarizes for the case of Germany, the sluggishness of a party democracy seems incompatible with the societal changes in the era of the Internet. Parties provide online information with far too little consistency, coordination, and strategy, and rarely truly engage with the broader interested public. This is despite surveys showing that more than half of European citizens believe they have some degree of political competence and are willing to play an active role in political discussions. Where citizens are indifferent towards the political sphere, or even reject it, it is primarily towards political parties (Sarcinelli 2011: 198–205). Instead of choosing traditional forms of political participation—joining parties, or heading to the ballot box—today’s citizens are more likely to participate in the so-called pre-political and extra-parliamentary spaces. This neither means that they are inactive nor politically uninterested (see Leggewie and Biber 2003: 128).

Parliamentary websites can be bridges of representative democracy—by connecting politically interested citizens to themselves, to their communities, or to alternative forms of political participation. Tenscher and Sarcinelli (2000: 86) suggest that parliaments must provide both an *institutional function* (neutral and nonpartisan) and a *competitive function* (accommodating party competition). Only together do these functions enable a legitimate, representative, and responsive parliament. In this differentiation, the parliament as an institution is not geared towards political competition. Rather, it informs citizens about its political events and processes and about the decisions of its representatives. Using a website, for example, the parliament ideally informs about political decisions while abstaining from judgment and valuation. Communication by the parliament as an institution can therefore contribute significantly to societal integration and political education.

The two spheres of the institutional and the competitive parliament are not rivals here, but complementary parts. As an institution, parliament can help citizens sort through the deluge of political news and prevent oversaturation. Even today, large parts of the population (such as the elderly or low-income households) uneasily navigate the seemingly infinite oceans of information available online, if they do at all. For political and highly complex topics, this situation can be improved if issues and relevant documents are presented in a clear and well-structured fashion. A parliamentary website can make coverage of current political debates especially accessible to citizens, for example, as a live stream in real time.

Parliament as an institution can build a bridge for the disenfranchised citizen who avoids party politics and the competitive aspect of parliament. From the normative standpoint of democratic theory, this is particularly desirable because it continues to bind citizens to the institutions of representative democracy. From a practical perspective, parliaments can offer a cheap and politically neutral alternative in the search for political information, with low barriers to entry (through online portals like a website, or free parliamentary newspapers, such as the German Bundestag’s “Das Parlament”). In offering social media for interactive political online communication, parliament allows for citizens to ask questions directed at the moderating, politically neutral expertise of parliament (represented by the administrators or

moderators of the respective social media tool), to express their opinions, and to exchange those ideas with others.

Newer research on political participation has investigated whether online participation acts as a substitute for offline engagement (substitution hypothesis), or as a complement (mobilization hypothesis). In research on participation, this question is not aimed at parliaments, but at a range of instruments of representation, deliberation, and direct democracy, and their use by citizens (see Kersting 2016). Both hypotheses can be adapted for this study however, since we ask what efforts parliaments make to get into digital contact with their citizens. Do these online information and communication technologies substitute for traditional offline methods, or do they act as a complement in parliament's mission of integration?

A comparative analysis of the websites of legislative bodies seems well suited to answer this question. A first look shows enormous variation in the extent of direct participation and communication. While some parliaments merely offer news and documents for informational purposes, others aim to motivate users to communicate interactively.<sup>3</sup> Yet despite this variation, and its potential implications for citizens' engagement, support of institutions, and political knowledge, the digital "toolbox" of parliamentary websites has rarely been examined until now. One notable exception is the University of Hull research project "Managing Parliament's Image," whose scientific analysis of parliamentary websites has resulted in several guidebooks for practitioners (see Leston-Bandeira and Thompson 2013).

Based on this study and the one by Schwanholz and Busch (2016) showing a wide spectrum of digital media use, analyzing a larger sample of countries seems advisable.

## Political Communication and Participation in Web 2.0

"Political communication is no clearly delineated research subject" (Pfetsch et al. 2013: 64). One point of departure is to understand political communication as an exchange about political processes and decisions that is played out in two distinct arenas: in the public arena, communication primarily relays information; in the parliamentary-administrative arena, it enables internal negotiations in preparation of political decisions. The communicating actors (senders, intermediaries, receivers) are always at the center: either the political system communicates with citizens through mass media in the public arena, or with itself in the parliamentary-administrative arena (Pfetsch et al. 2013: 64). With a view towards social media, this distinction can be supplemented with one further arena, in which politics and citizens are communicating directly.

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<sup>3</sup>See for example the comparative study of the Bundestag and the Houses of Parliament in Schwanholz and Busch (2016).



Political communication must be differentiated from political participation. Hoffman (2011) offers a conceptual framework that makes clear that all participation is communication, but that the reverse is not true: political participation implies an influence on political decisions, which is not a necessary criterion for political communication. Thus, participation aims to shape (directly or indirectly) political actions and the decisions of political actors (elites, office holders, or candidates), while political communication begins already with the transport and exchange of political messages and information (Hoffman 2011: 219).

Political participation can be internally differentiated into electoral (elections and campaigns) and non-electoral participation. The latter can again be separated into conventional forms (contact with politicians) and unconventional forms (political protest) (see Gabriel and Völkl 2008: 272–274). These forms of action are outside the scope of this chapter, but present compelling areas to examine digital media use in further research.

The concept of political communication can be structured along three dimensions, and along a temporal axis (see Hoffman 2011). Information flows in real time are also called synchronous communication, whereas asynchronous communication captures the nonsimultaneous transmission of messages or news. Situating communication tools on different dimensions shows how traditional forms of communicative exchange have been given a new, third dimension through the introduction of social media. One- or two-dimensional communication has changed into multidimensional and interactive network communication, which happens both in real time and asynchronous. The three dimensions can be differentiated as follows:

1. One-dimensional communication only works in one direction, namely, from (one) sender to (many) receivers. Mass-media unidirectional communication is encountered online through RSS feeds, newsletters, web television, audio files and podcasts, or digital notice boards, among others.
2. Two-dimensional communication implies a back-and-forth between sender and receiver. Information is not just broadcast, but exchanged; recipients can reply to the sender of news items and information, as is the case with email.
3. Three-dimensional communication through social media allows for an exchange not only between sender and receiver, but also between multiple senders and multiple recipients. Receivers can talk to each other as much as they can to the sender. Examples of social media are Facebook and Google+ (social networks), Flickr and Instagram (online communities), or Twitter (real-time microblogging).

Web 2.0 has had lasting effects on political communication and participation. Besides its status as a buzzword, Web 2.0 describes a real trend towards websites that allow for user-generated content or input. Formerly static sites have changed into dynamic platforms and thus created the technical preconditions for Internet users to virtually communicate, participate, and create. Often these platforms have very specific usages that open new avenues of social interaction for online users. This ranges from commenting and rating existing content (user reports and reviews)

to entirely user-generated content (in the case of Wikipedia). Previous authors point to platforms such as YouTube and Facebook as especially successful examples of Web 2.0, which illustrate the change of the Internet from an “improved advertising board” to a complete world of online entertainment (Münkler 2012: 59–65).

Previous research differentiates the consequences for political communication and participation resulting from Web 2.0 along two axes:

1. Social media and social networks allow for a (more) direct link between political decision-makers and citizens, potentially leading to more lively virtual communication about politics and policies. Wright et al. (2016: 77) identify “everyday political talk” in online communities and social networks as a central aspect of democratic citizenship. They argue that public opinion today arises from the interactions between private individual opinions and interactive online exchanges—political communication has significant democratic value, constitutes a break with traditional political offline communication, and has the potential to invigorate political interest and discourse online. Others already regard politics and Web 2.0 as inseparable: “where there is social media there is politics” (Nahon 2016).
2. Authors investigating political participation see a somewhat different, and less rosy, empirical picture (see Baringhorst 2014). Instruments of online participation, such as online voting, contact with politicians through email and social media, or online petitions and participatory processes, do not automatically result in increased use when compared to offline alternatives. Additionally, Kersting (2016) has shown significant variation in the levels of online participation between countries, time periods, and choice of participatory instrument.

When evaluating the empirical parts of this chapter dealing with political communication, it is important to remember that parliament remains a multilayered organization that communicates as a whole, as its constituent groups such as fractions and committees, and even as individual members (see Marschall 2013: 198). Here, we limit our scope to examining one part of this communication. Specifically, we examine communication by the parliament as a whole—the legislative assembly itself as an organ of the state, whose communication is managed by a centralized parliamentary administration.

## **Digital Media Use on Parliamentary Websites: An EU-Wide Comparison**

### *Methodology and Case Selection*

The following cross-sectional analysis is based on queries of the websites of national parliaments between January 21st and 29th 2015. We limit the analysis to the existence and functionality of the digital media applications listed in Table 5.1. We do not evaluate websites’ user-friendliness (how quickly can

**Table 5.1** Digital and social media tools and their dimensionality

Dimension of communication	Online application
One-dimensional	Audio files/podcasts
	Electronic newsletter
	Information video
	RSS feed
	Virtual tour
	Website application
	Web TV
Two-dimensional	Email or contact form
Three-dimensional	Facebook
	Flickr
	Google+
	Twitter
	YouTube
Depending on application	Other

Source: own compilation

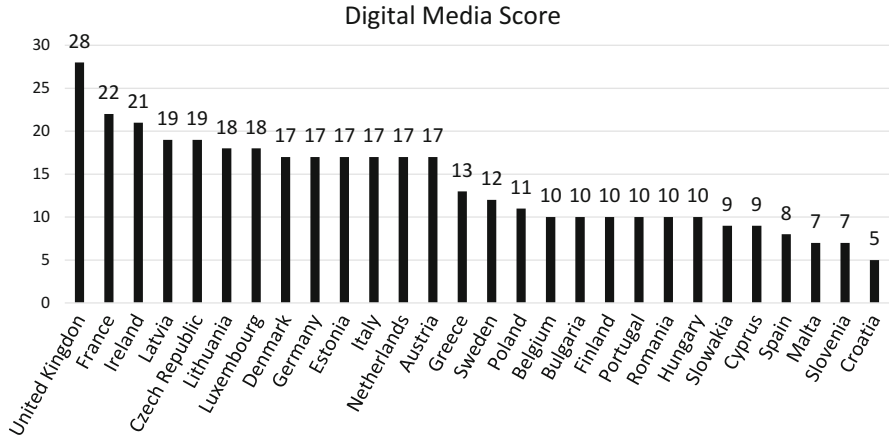
application be found, where are they placed, how are they integrated into the website's structure and design). The list of possible tools is firstly based on systematic studies of political communication such as Hoffman (2011). The distinction between one-, two-, and three-dimensional tools is shown in Table 5.1 and linked to concrete digital media applications. Secondly, the range of tools is based on the comparative case study by Schwanholz and Busch (2016), which showed the UK parliament being especially active in digital and social media use. With the unit of analysis being the individual parliamentary website, we thus searched for whether or not online platforms offered specific applications.

Our methodological approach is thus inspired by the comparative study covering the Bundestag and Houses of Parliament (Schwanholz and Busch 2016), but extends its range to all 28 EU member state parliaments. We follow the research avenue suggested in this previous paper by assembling a more comprehensive and differentiated account of parliamentary websites.

### ***Empirical Analysis of Parliamentary Websites: Results and Discussion***

From this analysis, an interesting picture begins to emerge from our analysis of digital media use by parliaments.<sup>4</sup> We checked the websites for the tools listed in Table 5.1, which allows us to rank parliaments according to the extent of their digital and social media use. Schwanholz and Busch (2016) coded the incidence of online tools in a dichotomous fashion—0 if the application was not offered, 1 if it was. For this chapter,

<sup>4</sup>The codebook and full list of results of the coding of all websites can be found in the Appendix.

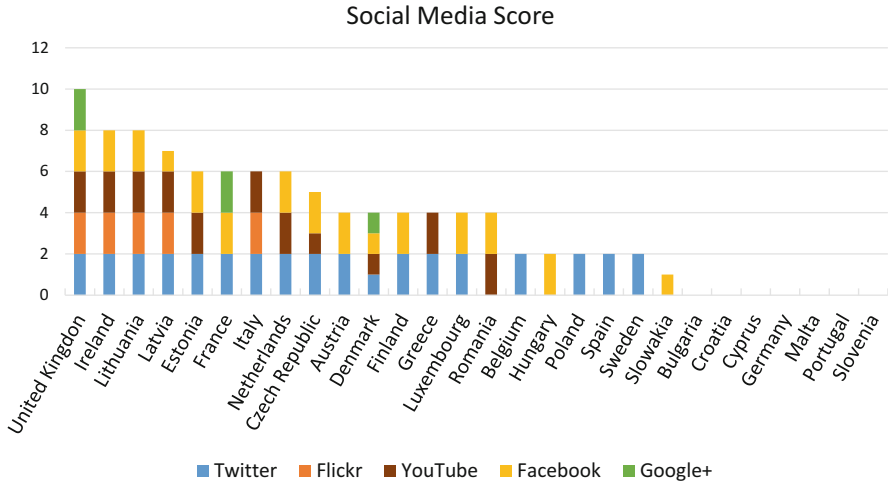


**Fig. 5.1** Digital media score by parliament. Source: own compilation from website queries in Jan 2015. 14 possible applications coded 0, 1, 2

we augmented the approach by not only testing the existence of particular applications, but also their proper functioning. We assigned a value of 0 to applications that did not exist on a parliament’s website. We assigned a value of 1 to tools that were offered, but with limited functionality (such as a button that did not lead to the desired application; the necessity to install a browser plugin before the tool could be accessed; or a redirect to an external website, thus not allowing access to the application on the parliamentary website itself). A value of 2 was assigned to applications that were offered natively at their full functionality. We searched for 14 distinct digital media applications—if all these are integrated and functioning properly, a website reaches the maximum value of 28. Figure 5.1 shows the results.

The analysis shows a great degree of variation in digital media use by parliaments. The scores range from a full 28 points to five. In between, we find groups of parliaments with identical or highly similar scores. This points to a bimodal frequency distribution, with six websites each scoring 10 or 17 points. As is evident from Fig. 5.1, the UK parliament is the only institution reaching the maximum score possible. Behind the United Kingdom, France’s *Assemblée nationale* (22 points) and Ireland’s *Dáil Éireann* (21 points) lead the remainder of the EU with scores above 20 points. At the other end of the scale resides Croatia, whose parliamentary website is the most limited: the *Sabor* offers RSS feeds and an email address (4 points). Web TV was offered at the time of analysis, but exhibited technical problems and was assigned one point. At positions 26 and 27 of the ranking are Malta and Slovenia with seven points each. They all also score far below the average of 14 points.

To get a clearer picture of the use of three-dimensional communication, Fig. 5.2 shows the scores for social networks. While this information is factored into the total scores in Fig. 5.1, separating it out allows us to judge what role newer, interactive forms of communication play.



**Fig. 5.2** Social Media Score by Parliament. Source: own compilation. Scores for three-dimensional communication tools color-coded. Five possible applications coded 0, 1, 2; maximum value: 10

Not surprisingly, the UK parliament leads the remainder of the EU in social media opportunities. Its digital offers are tailored to a population of whom two thirds are active in social networks, which is far above the EU average.<sup>5</sup> The websites of Ireland, Lithuania, and Latvia occupy the subsequent positions, each offering four out of five social media applications with the exception of Google+.

Seven of the 28 parliamentary websites did not offer any social media integration at the time of our survey. Almost all of these belong to countries that also show below average digital media use overall (see Fig. 5.1). Note however, that social media participation (creation of profiles, posting on Twitter, etc.) by the general population in three of these countries is actually above the EU average—Malta with 59%, Germany with 57%, and Cyprus with 54%. The German Bundestag constitutes another puzzle: Although its homepage scores relatively highly overall, and despite the German population being active in social networks, parliament as an institution is simply not present on social media here.

Similar discrepancies can be seen among websites that do use some social media. Belgium and Sweden are surprising in that more than two thirds of the population use social media (67% in Belgium, 62% in Sweden), yet parliaments have not adopted platforms beyond Twitter as a communication tool. The Hungarian parliament links up with citizens only through Facebook, even though 61% of Hungarians are active social media users.

<sup>5</sup>In 2015, an average of 50% of EU citizens between the ages of 16 and 74 were social network users; see Fig. 5.4 in the Appendix.

In summary, we find that around half of all EU member state parliaments have equipped their websites with a comprehensive set of one- and two-dimensional communication tools. However, most parliaments show ample room for improvement when it comes to today's interactive, three-dimensional applications. Looking more closely at social media tools shows that a full quarter of all EU parliaments do not use social networks at all, while a further six only use one service. With one exception (Germany), there is a high degree of correlation between extensive social media use and high digital media scores overall.

The UK parliament stands out as the most digital of EU legislative bodies. Schwanholz and Busch (2016) explain this finding primarily with political consulting. The United Kingdom used systematic surveys in 2006 and 2007 to gather information about what visitors expected of Parliament's website, and which communication and participation applications they wanted to use. Based on this data and additional external consulting, the Parliament instituted a team dedicated to creating and administering the available communication tools. Beyond these efforts, the United Kingdom has been especially proactive when it comes to digitizing its parliament. In 2014, a study was contracted to the Political Studies Association asking school and university students about their expectations for a "digital" legislative. Titled "Hardcopy or #Hashtag? Young People's Vision for a Digital Parliament," the study assembled a catalogue of suggestions intended to stimulate and strengthen interest in, and engagement with, representative democracy (PSA 2014).

From the normative perspective of democratic theory, disenchantment with politics and parliaments could provide a powerful incentive for countries to rethink their parliaments' digital strategies. Earlier in this chapter, we identified parliament as a possible alternative information provider where interest in party politics is waning. Linking this argument to our empirical findings shows that countries with especially low levels of trust in parliament (see Gabriel 2008: 207) make use of the most social media applications. Whether this is a spurious correlation can only be answered with further research and qualitative insights.

At the dawn of the digital era, fears were voiced about the somewhat unpredictable potential of the Internet and its possible effects on participatory democracy, given that decisions often lead to path dependencies:

The challenges politics has to deal with [...] are enormous, and as is often the case with new technological developments, far-reaching decisions have to be made early on, when the majority of actors often cannot properly evaluate these decisions' consequences (Tauss and Kollbeck 1998: 282; own translation).

Parliaments must adopt clear strategies for the expansion and use of digital media, and make a dedicated effort to spend the necessary resources, in order to allay these fears. The United Kingdom has been a trailblazer in this regard. The question remains whether *more* applications and communications are *better*. The tools offered on parliamentary websites can only be as good as they are accepted and used by citizens, and as relevant as they are administered and filled with content by parliamentary administrations.

## Conclusion

The general population has little knowledge about the work and workings of parliaments. As the distance—real or perceived—separating society and politics increases, trust in established political institutions decreases. Against this backdrop, digitization and digitalization have the opportunity to address these concerns, with new possibilities of creating interactive links between politics and citizens. In this chapter, we assume that parliamentary websites can be an appropriate medium to effectively supplement, augment, or replace traditional analog communication instruments used by parliament as an institution. We asked to what extent national parliaments in the European Union were employing digital media tools, and whether there are differences between the use of one-, two-, or three-dimensional applications.

To answer these questions, we queried parliamentary websites in 2015, noting whether they made use of 14 specific digital media tools, and whether those tools were functioning properly. We assigned values of 0, 1, or 2 to each application, for a maximum score of 28.

The results show some clear frontrunners like the United Kingdom and France, two midfield groups, and a cluster of countries in Southern and Eastern Europe scoring significantly below the average. When looking more closely at only social media applications, we found that half of all parliaments did not have any social media presence, and that the overall leaders also scored highly on the social dimension. In light of the high proportion of EU citizens with some online presence—more than 80% in 2015—many parliaments could certainly be expected to do more when it comes to communicating and linking with their citizens. To properly evaluate whether digital media use allows parliaments to better fulfill their role in societal integration, further qualitative research is needed to evaluate to what extent parliamentary applications are updated, maintained, and actually used. The sheer numbers cannot tell us whether more is truly better. However, they do point to differences in how parliaments have sought to utilize web communication as a medium across the EU.

## Appendix

**Table 5.2** Codebook

Application	Code	Score
RSS feed	Available	2
	Not available	0
Electronic newsletter	Can be subscribed via email	2
	Can be subscribed via text message	2
	Available online on website or as downloadable document (PDF)	1
	Not available	0
Website app	Available	2
	Not available	0
Web TV	Available	2
	Available, but displays error message or additional plugin notification	1
	Link available, but cannot be loaded/displayed properly	1
	Not available	0
Email	General information email, speaker, secretariat, specific department	2
	Website administrator email	1
	Link to emails of politicians or staff	1
	Not available	0
Contact form	Available for general inquiries or complaints	2
	Available for specific purposes (e.g. requests for visits)	1
	Not available	0
Twitter	Active Twitter account	2
	Button for sharing website or contents on Twitter	1
	Button and link to parliamentarians' Twitter accounts	1
	Not available	0
Flickr/Instagram	Available	2
	Not available	0
YouTube	Available	2
	Link available, but cannot be loaded/displayed properly	1
	Not available	0
Facebook	Active Facebook account	2
	Button for sharing website or contents on Facebook	1
	Button and link to parliamentarians' Facebook accounts	1
	Not available	0
Google+	Available	2
	Not available	0
e-petition	Available	2
	Petition can be signed online, but has to be delivered as hardcopy	1
	Link available, but cannot be loaded/displayed properly	1
	Delivery via email possible	2
	Not available	0

(continued)



**Table 5.2** (continued)

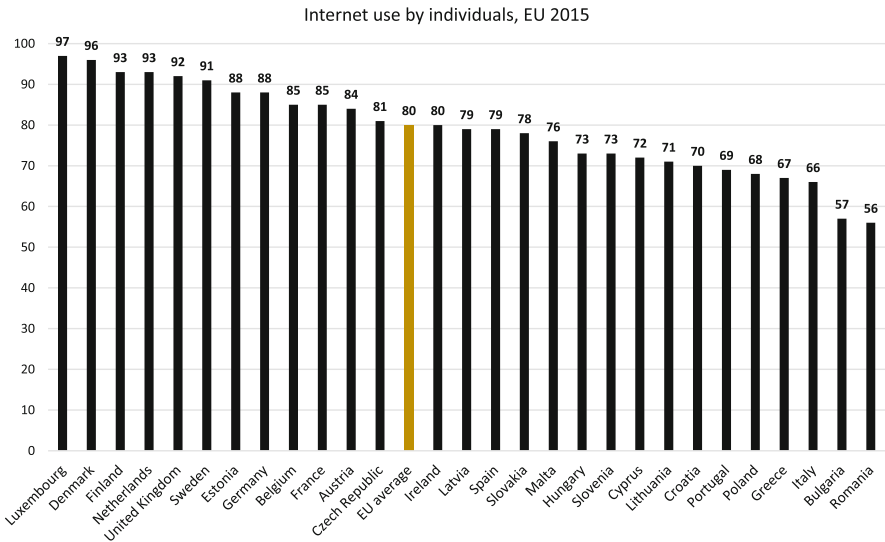
Application	Code	Score
Information video	General information about parliament	2
	Information for children and teenagers/specific information	2
	Not available	0
Virtual tour	Available	2
	Link available, but cannot be loaded/displayed properly	1
	Not available	0
Audio recordings	Available	2
	Link available, but cannot be loaded/displayed properly	1
	Not available	0
Other	Other communication tools available	2
	Passive, ambiguous	1
	Nothing else available	0

**Table 5.3** Results of coding by country (data collected January 2015)

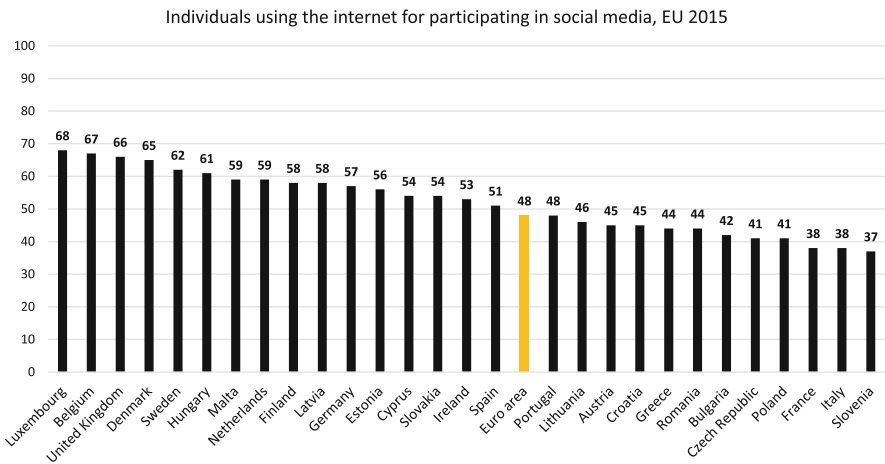
Country	RSS	Newsletter	App	Video	Web TV	Audio	Tour	Email	Twitter	Flickr	YouTube	Facebook	Google+	Other	Total
Austria (AT)	2	2	0	0	2	1	2	2	2	0	0	2	0	2	17
Belgium (BE)	0	1	0	2	1	0	2	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	10
Bulgaria (BG)	2	0	2	0	1	1	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	10
Croatia (HR)	2	0	0	0	1	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	5
Cyprus (CY)	2	2	0	2	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	1	9
Czech Republic (CZ)	2	2	0	2	2	2	2	2	2	0	1	2	0	0	19
Denmark (DK)	0	2	2	2	2	0	2	2	1	0	1	1	1	1	17
Estonia (EE)	2	2	0	0	2	1	2	2	2	0	2	2	0	0	17
Finland (FI)	0	0	0	1	2	0	0	2	2	0	0	2	0	2	10
France (FR)	2	2	0	2	2	2	2	2	2	0	0	2	2	2	22
Germany (DE)	2	2	2	2	2	2	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	2	17
Greece (GR)	2	1	0	0	2	1	1	2	2	0	2	0	0	0	13
Hungary (HU)	0	1	0	2	2	0	1	2	0	0	0	2	0	0	10
Ireland (IE)	2	0	2	1	2	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	0	2	21
Italy (IT)	2	1	2	0	2	0	2	2	2	2	2	0	0	0	17
Latvia (LV)	2	0	0	2	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	1	0	2	19
Lithuania (LT)	2	1	0	0	2	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	0	0	18
Luxembourg (LU)	2	2	0	2	2	2	2	2	2	0	0	2	0	0	18
Malta (MT)	0	0	0	2	1	1	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	7
The Netherlands (NL)	0	2	0	2	2	2	1	2	2	0	2	2	0	0	17
Poland (PL)	2	1	0	2	2	0	2	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	11
Portugal (PT)	0	2	0	0	2	1	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	1	10

(continued)





**Fig. 5.3** Internet use by individuals, 2015. Note: % of individuals aged 16–74; Internet use in the 3 months prior to survey; data from 2015. Source: Eurostat (<http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&plugin=1&language=en&pcode=tin00028>; accessed Sept 1st, 2016)



**Fig. 5.4** Individuals using the Internet for participating in social networks, 2015. Note: % of individuals aged 16–74; social network use in the 3 months prior to survey; data from 2015. Source: Eurostat (<http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&plugin=1&language=en&pcode=tin00127>; accessed Sept 1st, 2016)

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# Chapter 6

## Much Ado About Nothing? The Use of Social Media in the New Digital Agenda Committee of the German Bundestag

Julia Schwanholz, Brenda Moon, Axel Bruns, and Felix Münch

### Introduction

In times of decreasing political participation (indicated by lower voter turnout and less political party memberships) it has been suggested that the Internet could vitalise political communication through online participation. Social media tools in particular create a greater potential for direct connections between political representatives and citizens.

The question is whether more technical opportunities and also more communicative and participatory options online can lead to more political interest in general, and to closer interrelations between citizens and politicians. Although we cannot expect digitalisation to be a panacea for rekindling interest in democracy, empirical results show some evidence that new channels and fora are used to express one's own political opinion online (e.g. Coleman and Blumler 2009; Ritzi and Wagner 2016; Emmer and Vowe 2004). But the way that communication and participation flows may take shape should be distinguished with respect to the actors: while citizens' political online activities follow a bottom-up logic (from citizens or activists to politicians), communicative interrelations driven by political elites and politicians are top-down, often inspired by the demands of transparency or by the need for self-promotion and image management.

To estimate the social trust in democracy, interactivity and transparency are important indicators which perhaps become even more important for the idea of

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representative democracy that manifests in interrelations between citizens and representatives. Our argument is that the growing use of social media provokes a remarkable change in the interrelations between citizens and politicians, both in engendering closer relationships or in facilitating the formation of new sub-fora for interaction that exist in previously marginal spaces.

From the point of view of democratic theory, it is highly relevant whether citizens are vividly participating in politics or not. In light of recent events (such as the success of the Brexit referendum, the electoral successes of political parties on the far right wing, or the populist demagoguery of the Trump campaign in the 2016 US election), it seems even more important to evaluate the positive and negative potential of online communication and its implications for democracy.

As parliaments are at the heart of democracy, MPs can generally be seen as mediators between citizens and government in representative democracies. How they fulfil their parliamentary functions (including making laws, scrutinising government, voting on new initiatives, and—most relevant in this chapter—public communication) can either foster or hamper citizens' political interest and participation, and consequently their social trust in the legislative assembly, democratic values, and representative democracy itself. Using social media to actively communicate with citizens and report about their activities is increasingly crucial, and especially important for MPs with explicit ambitions for engaging with digital media. We have identified one specific community in the German parliament that can by nature be characterised as being more concerned with digital matters than all others in the Bundestag: the 16 full and 16 deputy members of the new Digital Agenda Committee (DAC), the only committee of its kind in the European Union so far. In terms of interactivity and transparency, the Bundestag's permanent parliamentary committees do not usually operate publicly; however, given that the DAC has started its committee work with a claim for more transparency, we seek to investigate how it (as a collective body) and its members (as individual MPs) fulfil their communicative ambitions to inform the public about their work. Do aspiration and reality drift apart due to parliamentary routine—which mostly consists of policy-making behind closed doors—or does the DAC depart from the traditional approach of committee procedures in the Bundestag, and work more transparently and visibly for the public?

This chapter addresses these questions by analysing the Digital Agenda Committee's social media activities. Social media applications were developed to foster more engaging online communication—not only politically. For political purposes, Twitter is especially frequently used by professionals (including political elites, journalists, and interest groups) in election campaigns; to report, comment on, and discuss political events; or to stimulate political online protest. Twitter users can be characterised as a “highly active sphere for political discussion with dynamics and content that spilled over to the public sphere” (Jürgens and Jungherr 2015: 471), even though the number of people who use Twitter frequently is highly divergent from country to country. In Germany, almost 12 million users visit Twitter every month. This number includes registered users as well as casual visitors to the



Twitter website; it is relatively low compared to the number of 500 million worldwide active users (cf. *Spiegel Online* 2016).

Nonetheless, Twitter seems to be an appropriate space in which to assess the communicative activities of MPs who describe themselves as digital experts in parliament. It is regarded as highly interactive, as “politicians can directly communicate with citizens without having to overcome the gatekeeping functions of traditional mass media” (Rauchfleisch and Metag 2016: 2), and may use the tool to interact with citizens as well as with journalists and other societal actors.

We collected Twitter data from late June to early November 2015 to determine quantitatively for each member of the DAC their number of followers, the number of tweets they posted or retweeted, and how many retweets and @mentions they received themselves. Qualitatively, we further explored what information MPs tweeted about the DAC’s work, and how they informed the public about parliamentary business and their individual activities. For the purposes of this chapter, we focus our attention on the top-down direction of communication (from politicians to citizens), rather than on bottom-up responses (from citizens to politicians).

We argue that by using social media (and in particular Twitter) to report on its activities, the DAC can increase transparency and interactivity between representatives and citizens. This could increase and strengthen citizens’, journalists’, and other actors’ interest in parliamentary business. In the following discussion, we examine whether the observable activities of the DAC members on Twitter realise such ambitions in practice for the period of our investigation. In doing so we contribute empirically to knowledge on MPs’ purposes for using social media tools (such as communication, self-management, and other reasons). We secondly generate evidence to assess a possible shift in how political offices may function (for example, by incorporating more direct representation).

The remainder of the chapter proceeds in the following order: the next section gives an overview of the history of the Digital Agenda Committee and outlines its recent establishment as a permanent committee of the Bundestag. We then present further theoretical considerations on social media and politics: we first examine how Twitter can be used as a general communication tool, and then evaluate existing studies that deal with the communicative activities of German MPs on Twitter. Next, we outline our empirical analysis of the committee members’ uses of Twitter, and of the public engagement with their accounts. Finally, we discuss our results, and present some general conclusions.

## **The Digital Agenda Committee: A New Permanent Committee in the Bundestag**

The governmental system of Germany is a parliamentary democracy. To distinguish it from other democracies (such as the majority democracy of Great Britain), Lijphart (2012) has classified it as being rather consensus-seeking in its mode of

problem-solving and decision-making. With respect to its internal parliamentary mode of operation the Bundestag is defined as a working parliament, emphasising the meaning of committees as bodies responsible for preparing the decisions of parliament, in addition to public debate in the plenary (Steffani 1979).

Most parliamentary business is done by permanent committees. They can generally be distinguished from other committees such as the mediation committee, the joint committee, and committees of inquiry. Enabling members to concentrate on a single, specialised policy area, permanent committees are fora where all bills are deliberated before decisions are taken in the plenary. Procedural rules give some sense of the significance of committees in parliamentary business: the committees discuss draft bills relating to their policy areas and usually revise them to a significant extent (or even reject them). At the end the bill can be passed by the plenary in its committee version—usually after another debate. The members of the committees therefore do a considerable amount of the technical policy work involved in the process of adopting legislation (cf. Bundestag 2016c).

Therefore, they can obtain information from the government and also from outside the parliament (such as from academic scholars, trade unions, or other practitioners) to gain expert knowledge on a particular policy issue. Committees are formed by MPs who come from the various parliamentary factions, in line with their relative strengths in parliament (cf. Bundestag 2016c).

Traditionally, each committee of the German Bundestag has been dedicated to a federal ministry (with a total number of 22 federal ministries corresponding to 22 permanent committees in the 18th electoral term of 2009–2013). This was changed after the federal election in autumn 2013, when following the recommendations of an April 2013 report by the enquete commission Internet and Digital Society (*Internet und digitale Gesellschaft*), the majority of MPs decided to establish a new permanent committee: the Digital Agenda Committee (DAC) was established in February 2014, increasing the number of permanent committees to 23.

The DAC is the only permanent committee that does not directly mirror any government department with a specific policy area, because no “digital” ministry exists at this point. As a natural consequence, the DAC only has an advisory role, without any immediate law-making responsibilities. It has 16 full members—composed proportional to the relative strengths of the parliamentary factions, it is comprised of 7 members from the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU), 5 Social Democrats (SPD), 2 members of the Left party (Die Linke), and 2 members of the Greens (die Grünen). These accompany and supervise all activities on the federal government’s Digital Agenda to exercise the parliamentary function of scrutiny. Further, empowered to take up issues on their own authority, the DAC’s members deliberate on issues that fall into their terms of reference, without referral from the plenary, in order to obtain information about legislative projects from the ministries (cf. Bundestag 2016a). The DAC is therefore somewhat restricted in its abilities to intervene in the legislative process. This contrasts with long-established permanent committees, which have extensive law-making responsibilities.

When the DAC was formed in 2014, the committee members were in favour of interactivity, and announced that they would organise the committee's work more transparently than other committees usually do. To achieve this, an online participation tool was used to connect (registered) citizens via the Internet to the committee's business, to stimulate a public online debate about certain digital policy issues. This pilot project and its results were documented until mid-2015, and are still available from the Website of the German Bundestag, but its actual activity concluded at that time (cf. Bundestag 2016b).

In assessing its performance after 1 year in office, the DAC was lambasted by journalists as well as by the online community: in February 2015, prominent German bloggers' comments recognised a wide gulf between ambition and reality as they reviewed the DAC's activity and results. They counted how often and on what topics the DAC had met over the period of 1 year; as well as expressing disappointment about the result of the 28 sessions held until the DAC's first birthday, they also criticised that there had been only 6 public sessions. They argued that, instead of making the committee's work more transparent for the public, it had continued to meet behind closed doors. Not surprisingly, the DAC was judged to have become nothing more than an additional, ordinary permanent committee among the others (cf. Voß 2015; Schnoor 2015).

One question not answered by the harsh reviews so far has been whether the DAC itself, or its members, uses social media effectively to connect more directly with citizens. We therefore investigate the committee's and its individual members' Twitter activities in order to estimate the extent of their social media use.

## **Theoretical Background: Twitter as a Social Media Engagement Tool**

Twitter has become a common resource for political communication among politicians, journalists, interest groups, and citizens. Compared to the traditional means of political communication—such as broadcast communication from sender to receivers via newspapers and television, or reciprocal communication between senders and receivers via email—Twitter instead follows a multidirectional, multi-participant logic: at a number of different levels of visibility and publicness, it enables forms of communication ranging from direct interpersonal exchanges through group discussions to the public broadcast of messages to an audience of unknown size (Bruns and Moe 2014). This facilitates both real-time and asynchronous communication among users of diverse backgrounds, including ordinary citizens as well as representatives of the media, politics, business, academia, etc. Users follow each other to observe the communicative activities of their counterparts. Messages of up to 140 characters can be posted, retweeted, liked, and responded to by others. Moreover, Twitter users can mention others and be mentioned by others in their tweets. Issue-specific topics can also be marked by

hashtags: topical keywords prefixed with the hash symbol (e.g. #hashtag). These can be used to aggregate users' comments on certain topics into a combined feed of live updates.

Although globally Twitter attracts some 500 million active users each month (cf. *Spiegel Online* 2016), the distribution of the Twitter userbase around the world is highly uneven. Take-up in Germany remains comparatively low, with only about 12 million visitors to Twitter per month; this number represents a combination of registered users and unregistered visitors to Twitter site. However, German users' activities on Twitter are nonetheless important, especially because of its affordances as a means for more direct and active communicative exchanges between citizens and their parliamentary representatives, and because the German Twitter population represents a particularly Internet-affine subset of overall society. But Twitter should not be overestimated in its contribution to the German political environment: the platform itself does not stimulate communication, but rather could be seen as a means to such end if parliamentarians and ordinary users choose to use it in this way. It facilitates everyday political discussion as a complementary practice to offline communication, but whether it can function as a substitute for the latter remains highly doubtful.

Early political science literature shows two contradictory expectations on how the concept of political representation might change over time due to digitalisation: on the one hand, cyber-optimists awaited a transformation of responsible party government into more direct, individualised types of political representation. For example, discussing developments in the United Kingdom, Coleman (2005) shows some anecdotal evidence for the decline of traditional political representation and of the importance of political parties, and sees instead a shift towards more direct representation and closer connections between MPs and citizens via the social media then available. On the other hand, cyber-sceptics predicted the reinforcement of established systems of political representation.

Suggesting a technological model of political representation in the networked society, Zittel (2003) empirically analyses three cases to shed light on the two different assumptions. He shows for MPs of the US House of Representatives, the Swedish Riksdag, and the German Bundestag that the Internet puts pressure on the concept of political representation. Despite country-specific differences, in all three cases the age of an MP played an important role for their digital media use. It was always the younger generation of politicians who established websites and communicated online with their constituencies. Zittel (2003: 49) carefully reflects on his own results in the context of an early stage of digitalisation.

Today, we see the broader acceptance of digital communication in politics, brought on not least by the adoption of social media. Studies now address not simply the question of whether MPs use digital media tools at all, but investigate which tools they use, and for what purposes. Assessing the literature on MPs' uses of Twitter, the results of empirical case studies tend to show that politicians utilise Twitter mostly for self-promotion and impression management. While only few of the British and German MPs covered by these studies adopt Twitter as a regular communication channel, most of their posting activity follows their pre-existing

ideological positioning and promotes them as opinion leaders (cf. Hegelich and Shahrezaye 2015; Jackson and Lilleker 2011). But what holds true for the United Kingdom and Germany is rather different in Switzerland: Rauchfleisch and Metag (2016:15) show that geographic factors are more important for politicians' interactions via Twitter than their party affiliations. Because of a low penetration rate in Switzerland, Twitter serves there a more elite network for politicians, political journalists, and interest group actors (ibid.). More generally, compared to previous studies there appears to be a decline in the importance of the age factor as a predictor of MPs' level of online activity; digital and social media tools are now used more widely by politicians of all ages.

Many studies dealing with MPs' social media uses do not concentrate on intra-parliamentary groups, using broad samples of MPs' Twitter activity instead of focussing on a selection of actors or distinct actor groups. By contrast, we have chosen to study the Bundestag's Digital Agenda Committee because it provides a ready example of a particular group of MPs whom we could expect to be highly interested and versed in using digital media. Additionally, the DAC is unique among parliaments within the European Union, and thus provides no opportunity for comparative investigation. It is underinvestigated; we know little about its members' activities; their idea of political representation; and their approaches to informing the general public via social media about the DAC's work. However, in light of the first evaluations of the DAC's performance by German bloggers after 1 year in office, our expectations of the DAC members' social media activities are not high. The next section provides a first overview of these activities.

## Empirical Data and Findings

### *Methodology*

We used an open-source platform for tracking and capturing Twitter data, DMI-TCAT (Borra and Rieder 2014), to collect tweets from the Twitter Streaming API by following the Twitter accounts identified as belonging to members of DAC and by tracking their screen names and the hashtags #btada and #DigitaleAgenda. These members and their Twitter screen names are shown in Table 6.1, grouped by party membership and committee role. The table also includes the four deputy members of the DAC for whom no Twitter account was identified, and whose activity is therefore not included in this study. There is no official account for the Digital Agenda Committee itself, and we are therefore focussing only on its members' individual accounts.

Data were collected for 4 months, from 23 June to 1 November 2015. The data collected using the Twitter Streaming API contain the tweets and retweets sent by each user being followed, as well as replies to and retweets of these tweets, and any

**Table 6.1** DAC committee members during the period of data collection

Name	Screen name	Party
Full members		
Dr. Andreas Nick	DrAndreasNick	CDU/CSU
Hansjörg Durz	Hansjoerg_Durz	CDU/CSU
Jens Koeppen ( <i>Chair</i> )	JensKoeppen	CDU/CSU
Maik Beermann	MaikBeermann	CDU/CSU
Christina Schwarzer	TinaSchwarzer	CDU/CSU
Thomas Jarzombek	tj_tweets	CDU/CSU
Tankred Schipanski	TSchipanski	CDU/CSU
Halina Wawzyniak	Halina_Waw	Die Linke
Herbert Behrens	HerbertBehrens	Die Linke
Dieter Janecek	DJanecek	Grüne
Konstantin v. Notz	KonstantinNotz	Grüne
Christina Kampmann	c_kampmann	SPD
Christian Flisek	ChristianFlisek	SPD
Saskia Esken	EskenSaskia	SPD
Gerold Reichenbach	g_reichenbach	SPD
Lars Klingbeil	larsklingbeil	SPD
Deputy members		
Bettina Hornhues	BettinaHornhues	CDU/CSU
Kai Whittaker	Kai_Whittaker	CDU/CSU
Marian Wendt	MdbWendt	CDU/CSU
Nadine Schön	NadineSchoen	CDU/CSU
Peter Tauber	petertauber	CDU/CSU
Ulrich Lange	UlrichLange	CDU/CSU
Marco Wanderwitz	wanderwitz	CDU/CSU
Petra Pau	PetraPauMaHe	Die Linke
Jan Korte	No account	Die Linke
Tabea Rößner	TabeaRoessner	Grüne
Volker Beck	Volker_Beck	Grüne
Sören Bartol	soerenbartol	SPD
Jens Zimmermann	JensZimmermann1	SPD
Martin Dörmann	No account	SPD
Svenja Stadler	No account	SPD
Carsten Träger	No account	SPD

other mentions of the user (tweets including @username). It will not include tweets from protected (private) users.

The Twitter hashtags in Table 6.2 were identified as topics related to the work of the digital agenda committee, and used as a measure of how many of the tweets in the dataset were related to the activities of the DAC. These were identified by coding the top 100 hashtags by frequency in our dataset as either a DAC topic or not. The frequency of hashtags follows a long-tail distribution, so that the top 100 hashtags describe most of the hashtagged activity. However, there may be other DAC-related hashtags that we have excluded by applying this cut-off;

**Table 6.2** Hashtags identified as related to Digital Agenda Committee's work

#adafinest	#digitaleagenda	#landesverrat	#oer
#bnd	#digitalebildung	#netzneutralität	#periscope
#btada	#digitalisierung	#netzpoltik	#piraten
#cdudigital	#dk15	#nohatespeech	#pressefreiheit
#cnetz	#edchatde	#nps15	#snowden
#cnight	#ff	#nsa	#vds
#ctour	#gba	#nsaua	#vorratsdatenspeicherung
#datenschutz			

additionally, of course, there may also have been other tweets related to the activity of the DAC that did not contain any hashtags at all.

## Results

The 4 months of data collection resulted in a dataset containing 60,318 tweets sent from 11,347 Twitter accounts, including the 26 full and deputy members of the DAC. Two of the 28 members of the DAC for whom we identified Twitter accounts did not send any tweets during the period, one full committee member Hansjörg Durz (@Hansjoerg\_Durz) and the deputy member Ulrich Lange (@UlrichLange), both from CDU/CSU. The other 26 members sent between 3076 Volker Beck (@Volker\_Beck) and 16 Bettina Hornhues (@BettinaHornhues) tweets during the period (Fig. 6.1). This represents an exponential distribution, showing a substantial variation in active participation on Twitter between the different members. The most active committee member, Volker Beck, sent 50% more tweets than the next most active member, Tankred Schipanski (@TSchipanski), who in turn sent 36% more tweets than Halina Wawzyniak (@Halina\_Waw), with a further 50% decrease from Halina Wawzyniak to the next most active member, Dieter Janecek (@DJanecek). There is no clear pattern of participation by party, although Greens (Grüne) party members are all located towards the more active end.

The total number of tweets sent by each member, shown in Fig. 6.1, can be separated into tweets containing hashtags (blue) and tweets without hashtags (orange), as shown in Fig. 6.2. There is some variation in the proportion of tweets containing hashtags, with all users using hashtags at least. The most active user Volker Beck (@Volker\_Beck) is amongst the least active users of hashtags, with hashtags in only 20% of his tweets, while Tankred Schipanski (@TSchipanski) has one of the highest uses of hashtags, at 51%.

Figure 6.3 shows the number of tweets by each committee member that contain one of the top 100 hashtags, and also indicates which of these (shown in green) we have identified as being related to topics associated with the DAC committee in Table 6.2. The graph is sorted by the total number of tweets containing hashtags sent, which has altered the order of the committee members compared to Figs. 6.1 and 6.2. Both the proportion and the absolute number of each member's tweets which contain one of the DAC topic hashtags provide us with an indication of that

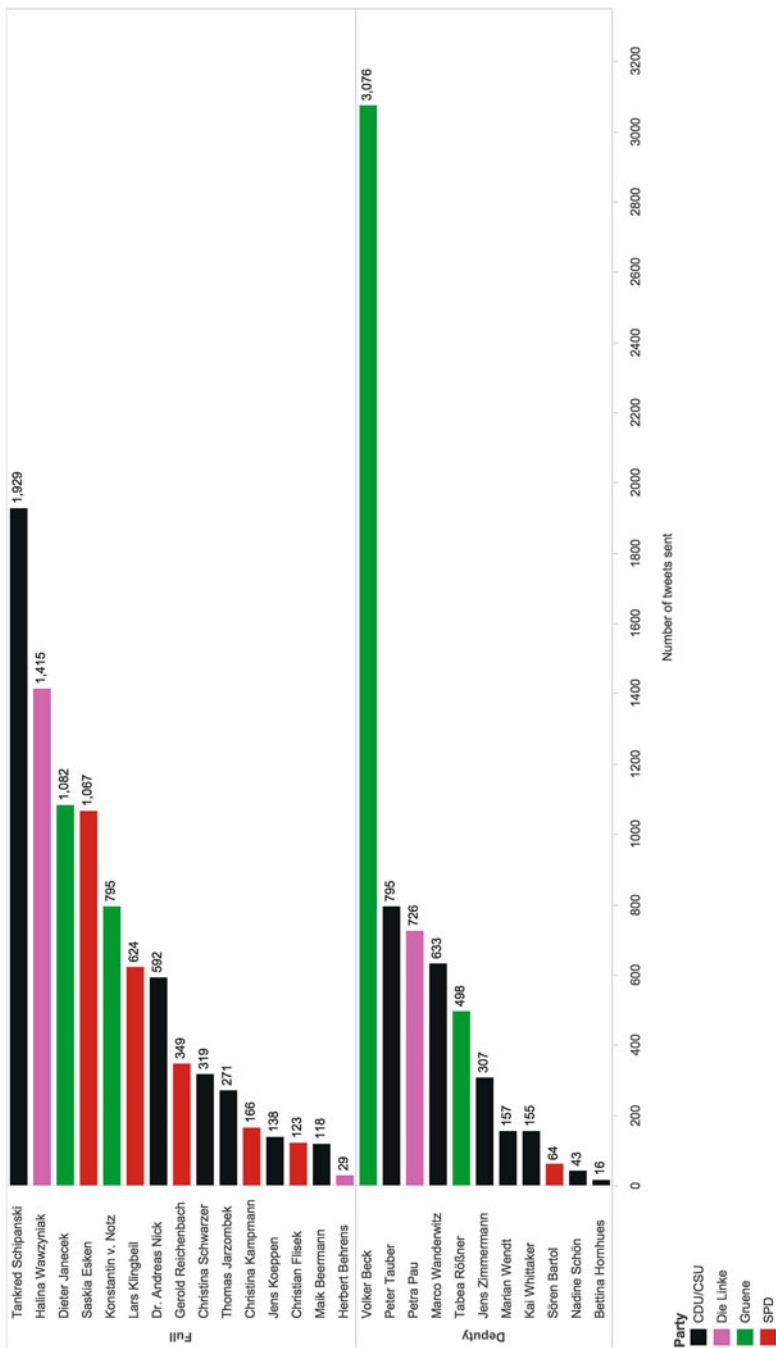


Fig. 6.1 Number of tweets per DAC member



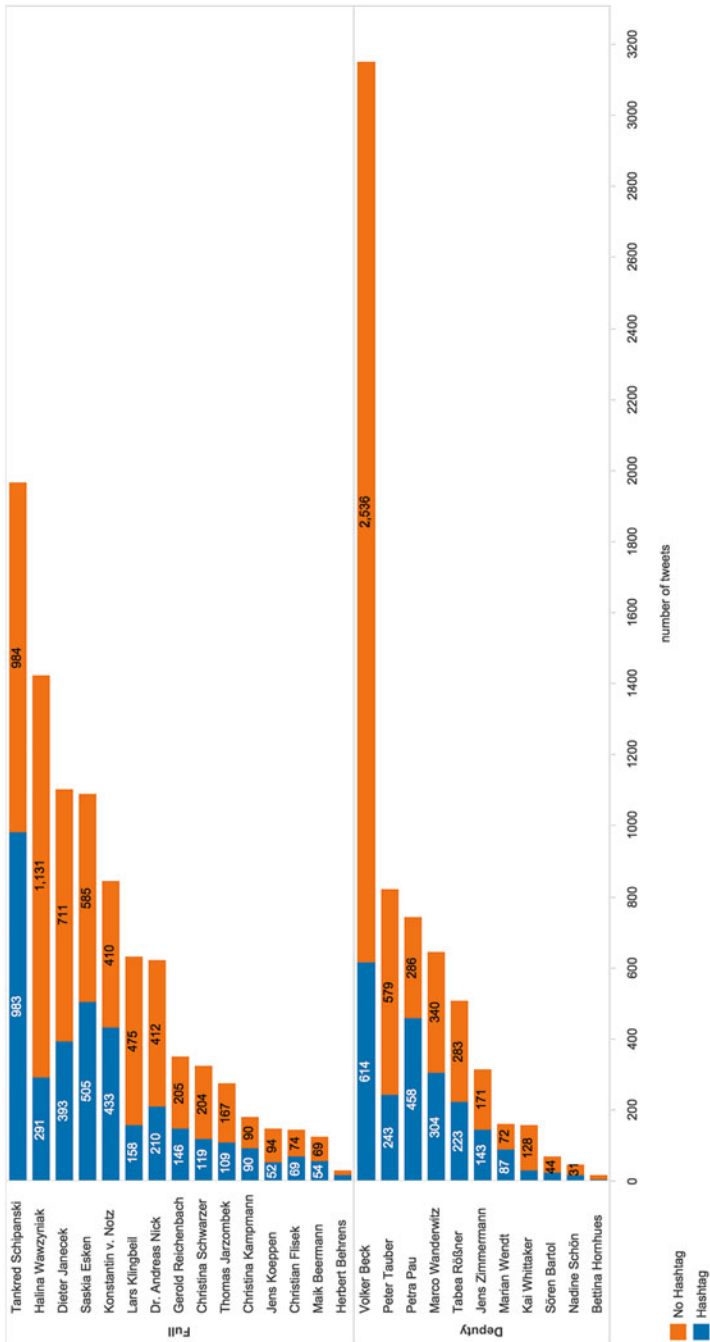


Fig. 6.2 Number of tweets per committee member using hashtags

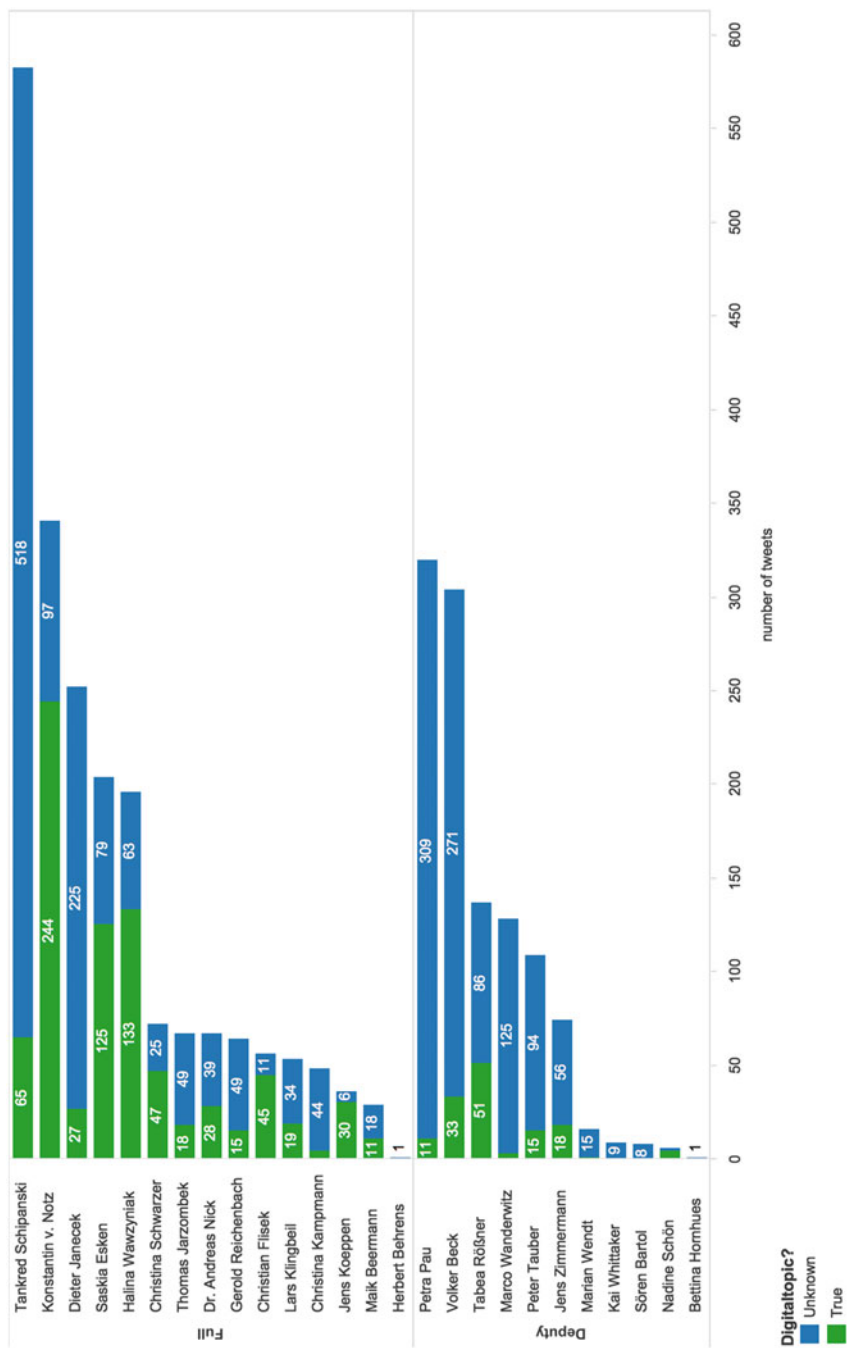


Fig. 6.3 Number of tweets per committee member using one of the hashtags identified as related to the Digital Agenda Committee's work

member’s activity in communicating about the DAC on Twitter. Figure 6.3 reveals that the most tweets with such hashtags were sent by Konstantin von Notz (244 tweets), and that these also constituted a high proportion of all the tweets containing one of the top 100 hashtags that were sent from his account. The next most active members were Halina Wawzyniak (133 DAC-related hashtag tweets) and Saskia Esken (125 DAC-related hashtag tweets). By contrast, although Tankred Schipanski sent the most tweets containing one of the top 100 hashtags, only 65 of these contained DAC-related hashtags, compared to 518 with other hashtags. The most active user by the total number of tweets sent during our period of observation, Volker Beck, only sent 33 tweets with DAC-related hashtags, out of a total of 304 tweets containing one of the top 100 hashtags. Meanwhile, although Christian Filsek and Jens Koeppen were not very active overall, sending only 143 and 146 tweets, respectively, during the collection period, over 80% of their tweets containing top 100 hashtags included DAC-related hashtags, which indicates that a high proportion of their overall activity was related to the DAC.

The hashtags most directly related to the DAC are #digitaleagenda and #btada (Bundestagsausschuss Digitale Agenda) but there were very few tweets sent by committee members which contained these, with only 19 tweets containing #digitaleagenda and 67 containing #btada (Table 6.3). Interestingly, most of the committee members that used one of these hashtags also used the other. The total tweets containing #btada or #digitaleagenda sent by each member are shown in Fig. 6.4 and highlights that the deputy committee members had much lower activity using these hashtags than full members.

By examining the number of unique users mentioned in tweets from each committee member, we can assess how much they are engaging with a broader audience. Again Volker Beck is the most active, this time in engaging with 1059 other Twitter accounts (Fig. 6.5).

**Table 6.3** Committee member tweets containing #digitaleagenda or #btada

Committee member	#digitaleagenda	#btada
Tankred Shipanski	3	11
Halina Wawzyniak		10
Dieter Janecek	4	8
Saskia Esken	3	5
Konstantin Notz	1	2
Lars Klingbell	2	1
Dr Andreas Nick	1	1
Tabea Röbner		2
Jens Zimmermann	1	3
Thomas Jarzombek	1	
Marian Wendt	1	
Jens Koeppen		21
Malk Beermann		3
Nadine Schön	2	
Total	19	67

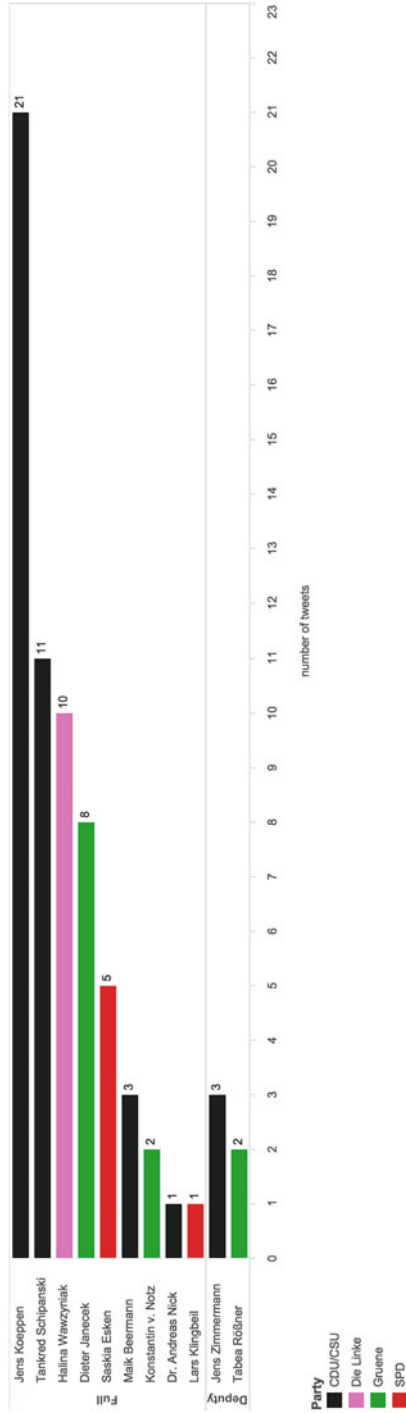


Fig. 6.4 Number of tweets containing #biada or #digitalagenda sent by each full or deputy member of the committee. Colour shows party membership

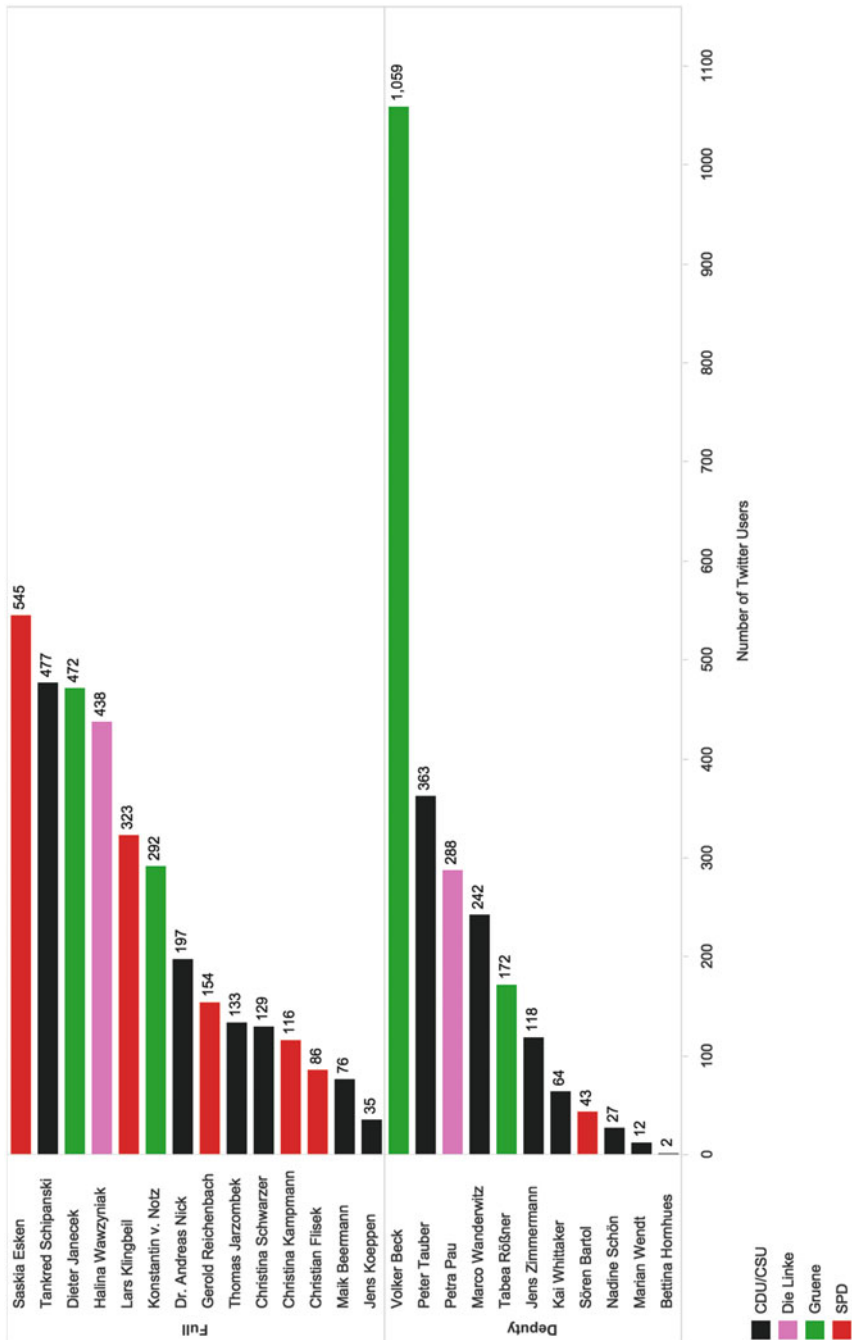


Fig. 6.5 Number of unique users mentioned in tweets per committee member

Conversely, it is also possible to examine how many other users @mention each committee member (Fig. 6.6). Again Volker Beck leads the field, being contacted by 3409 accounts, over three times the number he contacted. Peter Tauber and Konstantin Notz only @mentioned 363 and 292 unique users in their tweets, respectively, but are the second and third most @mentioned committee members with 1836 and 1741 accounts mentioning them. This means that they received 5–6 times as many mentions as they made. In Fig. 6.6 the type of mention is shown as retweet (green) and @mention (blue). Some users may have sent both types of tweets, so the totals may count some users twice. The only committee member being retweeted by a considerable number of users is @volker\_beck, with 829 unique users.

Tweets can also contain links to external content, by including URLs. These usually indicate the sharing of information from outside of Twitter. Figure 6.7 shows the number of tweets containing URLs sent by each committee member. Again Volker Beck is the most prolific, with the 775 tweets containing URLs representing 25% of his total tweets. Tankred Schipanski is next with 561 (29%) tweets containing URLs. Marian Wendt has the highest proportion of tweets containing URLs at 62%, but this still amounts to only 91 tweets in total.

By plotting the number mentions against the number of retweets (Fig. 6.8), it becomes evident that the proportion of each remains similar for each of the members even as the number of tweets they send increases.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The empirical results have generated some interesting but also disappointing results. We do not find any common marketing strategy amongst its members to promote the topics, procedures, and aims of the Digital Agenda Committee. There seems to be no substantial relationship between what the committee members tweet out and what the DAC is concerned with. Party membership also does not predict the DAC members' activities. Further, there are no clear patterns in who is engaging with their Twitter audience, when, and how often.

Overall, this points to a use of Twitter by the members of the Digital Agenda Committee that is no more and no less active and engaged than is the case for the average member of the Bundestag; it appears that they have failed to take any steps beyond the ordinary in order to promote this extraordinary, particularly Internet-affine committee through one of the leading social media platforms, and this affirms the criticism of the committee and its work that was published on its first anniversary by some of Germany's leading bloggers. We note in this context that our data gathering continued for a sufficiently long period of time, and occurred outside any major federal election campaigns or other extraordinary circumstances that would have artificially boosted the volume of social media activity that the DAC members engaged in—what we have captured and documented here is highly likely to

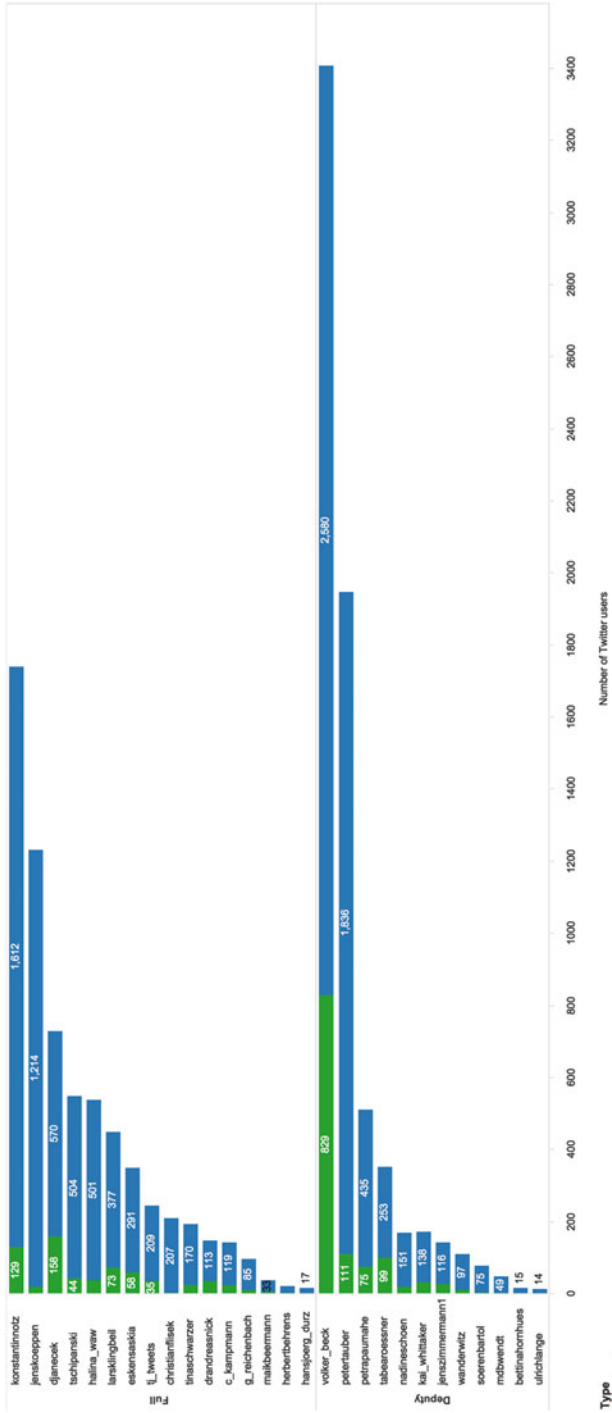


Fig. 6.6 Committee members mentioned by other users

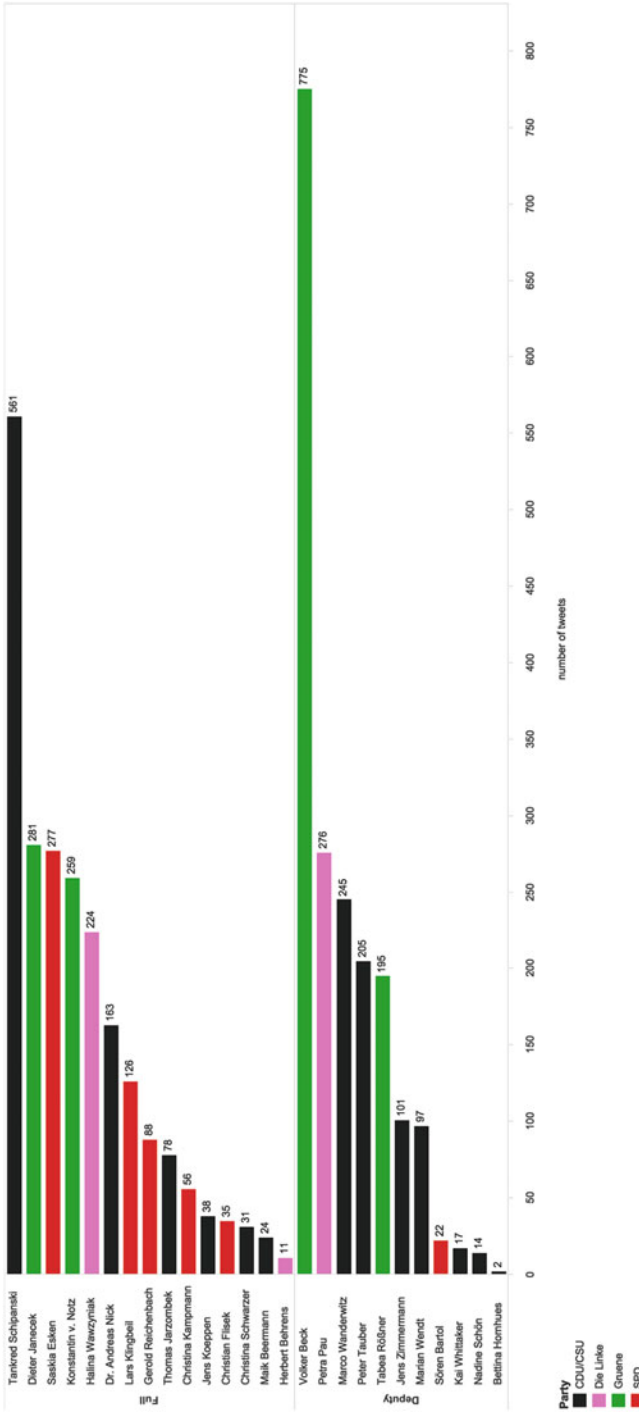


Fig. 6.7 Tweets containing URLs sent by members of the DAC



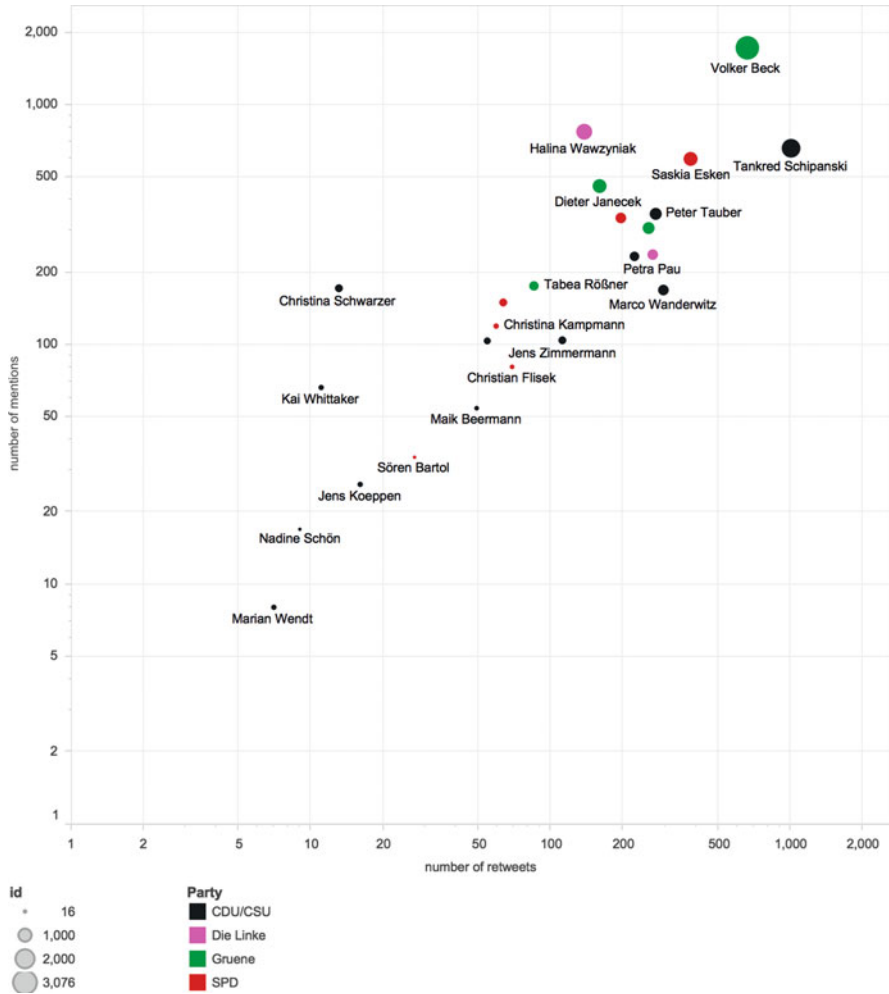


Fig. 6.8 Comparison of the number of mentions and retweets sent by each DAC member (log/log graph scale)

represent the levels of social media engagement by committee members during their day-to-day parliamentary work.

We did not track a comparative sample of non-DAC members of the Bundestag, which would have enabled us to explore whether even this limited level of activity is nonetheless ahead of their peers in other roles and committees. Outside of such comparisons, however, in absolute numbers the level of activity and engagement by DAC members that we have observed here must already be considered to be remarkably low in the context of their specific roles on the committee, and of the stated aims at the institution of the Digital Agenda Committee. We would have expected this group to be more active, given their self-declared ambitions for

engaging with digital media; we would have expected them to be more proactive in reaching out to and engaging with ordinary citizens and societal stakeholders, in order to transport the matters addressed by the committee into wider public debate and enhance the transparency of the committee's work; and we would have expected them to make a concerted effort, in particular, to use the affordances of leading social media platforms to create a focal point for discussions of the DAC's work—in the case of Twitter, for instance, by consistently establishing and promoting a dedicated hashtag for the Committee. None of these expectations have been met to date.

This is not entirely surprising. Research on the use of Twitter in the House of Commons provides clear evidence that MPs tweet first and foremost to manage and promote their personal brands, rather than to inform the public about their current parliamentary work. Second, MPs' use of Twitter in the United Kingdom is also intended largely to promote their local activity and constituency work (cf. Jackson and Lilleker 2011). Our results paint a similar picture: the number of tweets dealing with the DAC or related topics (identified by the hashtag #btada or #digitaleagenda) is relatively low. Amongst 60,318 tweets sent by 11,347 Twitter accounts including the 26 members of the DAC, we find only 19 tweets using #digitaleagenda, and 67 tweets using the hashtag #btada. Most of the latter were sent out by Jens Koeppen, the head of the committee.

It is unrealistic to expect that parliamentary committee work will ever attract a massive social media audience, of course—too much of it is too topically specific and procedurally complex to be relevant and accessible to a generalist social media audience. But this should not stop it from attracting a smaller but no less important group of dedicated followers with a specific interest in the topics under discussion, and—used appropriately—social media do have a valuable role to play in enhancing the transparency and popular understanding of the sometimes arcane activities of such committees; on social media, the work of such committees is not required to attract a *large* audience; it merely needs to attract the *right* audience. It can only ever do so, however, if parliamentarians themselves make sufficient efforts to actively and consistently document and promote the work of their committees—if they proactively and collectively identify the most effective ways of using their social media platforms to engage with the citizens and stakeholders who may be interested in their work. In a consensus-seeking parliament like the Bundestag, this must also be a concerted effort across party boundaries. On present evidence, the members of the Digital Agenda Committee of the German Bundestag have been found sadly wanting in their social media activities, unfortunately.

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# Chapter 7

## Social Media Logic and Its Impact on Political Communication During Election Times

Pieter Verdegem and Evelien D’heer

### Introduction

The old tripartite framework of political communication, involving the relationships between politics, the media, and the public, is increasingly in state of flux (e.g., Blumler and Gurevitch 2000; Brants and Voltmer 2011; Dahlgren 2005). Whereas communication with voters is traditionally mediated via mainstream media, the Internet, and social media in particular, is understood as a means to reconnect politicians with citizens (Coleman 2011; Graham et al. 2013; Norris 2000). In turn, this would imply that politicians become less dependent on mainstream media, and its logic, which contrasts recent tendencies indicating the growing dependency of politics upon media (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999; Strömbäck 2008). However, we argue that social media are equally non-neutral transmitters of communication and information (Klinger and Svensson 2014; van Dijck and Poell 2013). In other words, they are characterized by a logic that is distinct from but interacts with mainstream media logic, which is well presented by Chadwick’s (2013) “hybrid media system.” Hence, mainstream media do not dissolve, but coevolve with newer media.

This chapter investigates a (non-exhaustive) number of scenarios related to social media and political campaigning. Do social media contribute to the dependency of politicians upon mainstream media? Or do they decrease it? If so, do social media generate new dependencies, or not?

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The complexity of our contemporary media environment, in which older and newer logics coexist, complicates our understanding of the mediatization of politics. Through in-depth interviews with politicians and a content analysis of politicians' use of social media, we aim to better understand the influence of this new media environment on politics. Since the logic of social media is an emerging conceptual frame, our empirical study is exploratory and a starting point for further research.

Below, we outline the changing nature of political campaigning and relevant concepts in relation to the analytical understanding of the interdependencies between media and politics: political logic (Esser 2013; Meyer 2002) and media logic (Altheide and Snow 1979; Esser 2013). In addition, we engage in the discussion of new readings of the concept of media logic, originating from new media scholars (Klinger and Svensson 2014; van Dijck and Poell 2013). Following, we outline our methodological approach and the research context in which this study is situated, i.e., the Northern European country Belgium. Last, we present the findings of this study and conclude with a discussion, including limitations and some areas for future research.

## Social Media in the Hypermedia Campaign

In line with the changing socio-technological environment, politicians incorporate online tools in their election campaigns. In this context, Howard (2006) conceptualizes the hypermedia campaign, where communication is relayed across a wide range of outlets. Mainstream media as well as online media (and now social media) are integrated. Campaigning includes both informational and interactive components and alignment of off-line and online activities in which journalists, but also pundits, supporters, and undecided citizens, have their place.

Strömbäck and Van Aelst (2013) argue that politicians are more likely to adapt to the logic of mainstream media in "the electoral arena" (Sjöblom 1968). As they further explain, politicians wish to reach and convince as many voters as possible. Hence, we can argue that mainstream media but also social media will be employed with these goals in mind. Politics is understood as an institution that is separate from, but interacts with, media. Put concisely, we can define a *political logic* (Esser 2013; Meyer 2002), which includes (1) the political decision-making process, predominantly executed away from the media, and (2) the presentation of one's ideas and the legitimation of one's political program. The latter reflects the "presentational dimension" or symbolic side of politics (Esser 2013), which is particularly prominent during election times as politicians wish to present a favorable and attractive image towards voters.

Below, we conceptualize five ways in which social media can shape and be shaped by politicians' behavior. Taking into account the hybrid media environment, we rely on existing literature on the intersections between politics and *news* media

logic (Esser 2013) as well as emerging conceptualizations of social media logic (Klinger and Svensson 2014; van Dijck and Poell 2013).

### *Negotiating News Values*

As mentioned above, politicians rely heavily on media during election times in order to reach the wider public (Strömbäck and Van Aelst 2013). Hence, we assume that politicians will tailor (some of) their communication on Twitter in order to anticipate news coverage (cf. “self-mediatization,” Esser 2013; Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999; Meyer 2002). This concurs with the changing nature of journalism in the social media era, as research has shown that political journalists incorporate the use of Twitter in their routines (Parmelee 2013a; Rogstad 2013) to keep up with campaign developments during elections (Wahl-Jorgensen 2014). Mainstream media are characterized by their own rules and norms, which do not necessarily coincide with the way politicians aim to present themselves. Broersma and Graham (2012) studied UK and Dutch newspapers’ use of Twitter as a source during election times. Their findings indicate that British newspapers cover politicians’ “bad practices” on Twitter and messages that fit the conflict frame (e.g., whereby one politician attacks another). In addition, coverage in the Netherlands shows that most attention goes to the more prominent politicians. Furthermore, Parmelee (2013b) found that “punchy” and “plainspoken” tweets are appealing for political journalists (because of their entertainment value) (Harcup and O’Neill 2001). These very concrete examples show that, at least to some extent, journalists “normalize” (Singer 2005) Twitter. Following, we question to what extent politicians acknowledge this and “stage” their Twitter activity to retrieve positive (and avoid negative) coverage. More so, our interview data adds to content analytical studies, as journalists’ use of social media is not always visible in media coverage (Lecheler and Kruikemeier 2015).

### *Going Viral*

Alike mainstream media, not all social media messages receive equal reach and attention. However, the processes through which this occurs are quite different. Van Dijck and Poell (2013) point to the complex, and largely invisible, interplay of user activities and platform strategies to prioritize some content over others. This prioritization takes the form of popularity metrics, which are a key feature of social media. An example here is Twitter’s Trending Topics feature, via which Twitter displays what is currently discussed on the platform. In turn, viral content (both positive and negative) can influence journalists, who use Twitter as an awareness system to get a sense of what is going on (online) (Hermida 2010). Since virality is in part based on user activity, manipulation or “reverse engineering” by users, and

politicians in particular, is possible. Simultaneously, politicians' messages can "go viral" beyond their control (and request). Diakopoulos (2015) defines algorithms as "the new power brokers in society," as they largely invisibly structure online information and communication.

### *Anticipating "Likes"*

Social media popularity metrics do not only rank what is popular on the platform in general, but also provide a very personal popularity report. Facebook, but also Twitter, is "filled with numbers" (Grosser 2014), which indicate reach, recognition, and acceptance, and hence provide politicians with "useful" feedback to guide future behavior. In addition, as Grosser (2014) argues, this continuous audit of the self generates a desire for more likes, comments, or friends. In other words, we operate in the so-called like economy (Gerlitz and Helmond 2013), which refers to the techno-commercial aspect of social media platforms. In short, our social interactions have economic value for social media companies. Hence, politicians are challenged as to what extent they shape their practices in accordance with their personal popularity metrics or to what extent he/she can address the user as a citizen (rather than a consumer). Social media blur the boundaries between these private, corporate concerns and the public, political debate (Fenton 2012). In other words, politicians' increase in control over their self-representation needs to be juxtaposed with the ways social media, as economic entities, reward certain behavior over other.

### *Content as a Process*

According to the systems framework of political communication outlined by Blumler and Gurevitch (1995, p. 12), political and media organizations are "*involved in the course of message preparation.*" Subsequently, messages are presented to the audience, which remain largely invisible. However, content production on social media allows for the inclusion of non-elites, as messages are no longer fixed but can be debated and discussed limitlessly (Klinger and Svensson 2014). Politicians themselves redistribute and discuss mainstream media content on social media, labeled as "interpretative linking practices" (Enli and Skogerbø 2013). They attribute to the extension and modification of content online. In addition, politicians encounter the variable nature of own messages, as they receive online comments and questions on their tweets or Facebook posts. However, research has shown that politicians do not engage in a direct dialogue with citizens (Enli and Skogerbø 2013; Graham et al. 2013; Larsson 2015; Ross and Burger 2014). In other words, empirical work shows very little evidence of politicians adapting to social media content as a process.



## ***Audience Selectivity and Reach***

As previously mentioned, mainstream media are still deemed important to reach the broader public. In comparison, audience reach via social media is limited and fragmented. This is particularly the case for Twitter, as politicians consider Facebook more suitable to reach voters (Enli and Skogerbø 2013; Lilleker et al. 2014).

As Klinger and Svensson (2014) argue, social media content is subject to selective exposure and fragmented audiences, including like-minded peers. Politicians define their own network of users they wish to follow, whereas they do not control their audiences. Users themselves decide whether or not they follow a politician on Twitter or like a politician's page on Facebook. This contributes to the personalization of information flows, which is further enhanced by social media algorithms (e.g., recommendations) (van Dijck and Poell 2013). Although politicians' support network can be put into practice, e.g., to share or spread particular content, it equally limits them to reach the wider public.

## **Methodology**

For this research we take a "small data" approach (Stephansen and Couldry 2014) to Twitter and Facebook, using qualitative interviews and a close reading of politicians' online behavior. Below we outline the selection of our participants as well as the collection and analysis of their Twitter and Facebook data.

## ***Research Context and Participant Selection***

This study includes 19 politicians running for the 2014 federal elections in Belgium. Since the late 1960s, Belgian political parties and traditional media are organized along regional lines, i.e., Flanders (ca. 6 million inhabitants) and Wallonia (ca. 4 million inhabitants). Consequently, federal elections result in two separate electoral campaigns. In this study, we include the Dutch-speaking candidates (i.e., from Flanders). Flanders' party system is highly fragmented, which inevitably leads to coalition governments. Hence, competitors are also potential coalition partners. Further, in line with international research, traditional media still take an important role in the Flemish election campaign (Lilleker et al. 2014). In this respect, the Flemish case seems suitable to investigate the contribution of social media to the (in)dependency of politicians upon mainstream media.

Voting is mandatory in Belgium and is based on candidate lists, organized per electoral district (of which Flanders counts six). This implies that, per party, citizens can vote for the list (and agree with the sequence of names) or vote for

specific candidates on the list (and potentially alter the sequence of names). Six Flemish parties are represented in all six electoral districts in Flanders. The party names and respective ideologies are the following: CD&V (the Christian Democrats), GROEN (the Green party), N-VA (the Flemish nationalist party), Open VLD (the Liberal party), Sp.a (the Social Democrats), and Vlaams Belang (the right-wing extremist party).

By means of “purposive sampling” (Patton 2002), we defined our selection of participants. In total, 58 candidates were contacted, of which 19 agreed for the collection of their social media data and in-depth interviews. First, we selected candidates with a Facebook and Twitter account. It is worth noticing that these politicians manage their own social media presence, albeit with encouragement and some guidance from the party. The usage of Facebook is well established among political candidates whereas for Twitter this is less the case. Survey research has shown that 89% of the candidates intended to use Facebook as a campaigning tool, whereas for Twitter this was 46% (Van Aelst et al. 2015). Related, the Flemish population is very active on Facebook (i.e., 70%), whereas for Twitter, adoption is up to 30% (iMinds-iLab.o 2014). These reasonable adoption rates, in combination with the importance of traditional media, make the Flemish context an interesting one to assess the role and value of social media in political campaigning.

Second, the selection of our political candidates accounts for party affiliation. More specifically, the parties and districts are represented relative to their respective sizes: N-VA (4), Open VLD (4), S.pa (4), CD&V (3), Vlaams Belang (2), and Groen (2). Third, in terms of political function, the sample includes both higher profile candidates (e.g., former ministers and members of the Flemish parliament) and lower profile candidates (e.g., members of the provincial and municipal councils). Related, both incumbent and nonincumbent candidates are included. They all occupy places ranging from one to four on the candidate lists. Last, we opted for diversity in age (ranging from 30 to 59, average 43) and gender (13 males and 6 females), which proved challenging.

The variety in participants’ profiles does not imply the generalizability of the findings, but serves to obtain diversity in interpretations and practices. We include the age, gender, and party membership of the candidates when using their quotes in the results section.

### ***In-Depth Interviews with Politicians***

The 19 semi-structured interviews were conducted in April 2014, as politicians were no longer available during the final weeks of the campaign up to Election Day, May 25, 2014. The interviews started with questions concerning politicians’ interest in social media and the use of social media as part of the communication mix employed during election times. Following, we elaborated on the incentives and evaluation of social media as tools to reach a wide audience and present a favorable image of the self. We discussed politicians’ “imagined audiences” (Marwick and

boyd 2011) to understand what audiences they have in mind when they prepare particular messages. In addition, we interpreted what politicians describe as “appropriate” (Esser and Strömbäck 2014) behavior on social media and to what extent they adapt or why they do not.

The interviews were analyzed using NVivo, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). We assessed and coded the data in an iterative fashion, reflecting the interplay of inductive and deductive coding (Strauss and Corbin 1998). We used our conceptual work on media logic, social media logic, and political logic to analyze the interviews.

### *Social Media Data Collection and Analysis*

Social media data collection is “actor based” (Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan 2012) as we start from the candidates’ Twitter and Facebook accounts to collect messages. In line with our research focus, data collection took place during the election campaign (i.e., approximately 4 weeks before Election Day). More specifically, data was collected from the 23th of April until the 28th of May, with Election Day being the 25th.

Twitter and Facebook data collection is based on the platforms’ respective application programming interfaces (APIs). For Twitter, the Streaming API allows us to capture tweets from our sample of 19 politicians using the open-source tool yourTwrapperkeeper (yTK) (Bruns 2012). Following this procedure, we collected a corpus of 1273 tweets. For Facebook, two applications were used to collect data, i.e., Digital Footprints (<http://digitalfootprints.dk/>) and Netvizz (Rieder 2013). This is related to Facebook’s restrictions on data collection, and related, the restrictions these applications apply. Via the Digital Footprints website, we were able to retrieve data from politicians’ personal profiles with their consent. Since Digital Footprints limits the number of participants we can track, we used Netvizz to collect data from the politicians’ public pages. In case of multiple Facebook profiles and/or pages (which was often the case), politicians provided their most used channel to communicate with the broader public. In total, we collected 977 Facebook posts and comments.

Twitter and Facebook combined we collected 2250 messages (i.e., tweets, posts, and comments). There is great variation between candidates’ level of activity on social media, as the average number of messages sent is 118 (ranging from 24 to 381), with a standard deviation of 100 messages. Although the total volume of messages would allow a quantitative presentation of the data, we take into account our small sample size and the great variation in activity between the participants. The data supports and enriches the practices and meanings reported by the participants. In general, social media data complicate the existing boundaries between quantitative and qualitative methods. This has resulted in studies that draw from big samples, but apply a qualitative analysis (e.g., Meraz and Papacharissi 2013), as

well as small sample approaches that apply quantitative and mixed approaches, as is the case here (e.g., Marwick and boyd 2011; Stephansen and Couldry 2014).

The structural analysis of the data focuses on three “functional operators”: addressing/mentioning (via @), indexing (via #) and hyperlinking (via http://) (Thimm et al. 2014). For Facebook in particular, we added sharing (other users’ posts) and commenting (on other users’ posts or comments). We coded whether these operators refer to (rival) politicians/parties, media outlets/journalists, or citizens. For hyperlinks in particular, we also coded the content type (i.e., textual, visual, audiovisual, or hybrid) and platform of reference (i.e., Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, other social media, or websites).

The content of the messages, in which these functional operators are embedded, was analyzed as well. Based on an iterative coding process, departing from the literature (e.g., Graham et al. 2013; Klinger 2014; Larsson 2015; Mirer and Bode 2013; Parmelee and Bichard 2012) as well as the data, we defined the following seven overarching content codes: (1) campaigning activities; (2) policy-related material; (3) distributing traditional media content (in which the politician/party is covered); (4) criticizing traditional media, rival parties, or other; (5) replies to critics; (6) thanking voters/supporters; (7) practical news about the elections (i.e., nonideological content); and (8) nonpolitical content.

## **Results: Understanding the Hybrid Social Media Ecology**

### ***Balancing Newsworthiness and Bad Publicity***

Our participants are well aware that journalists are among their audience on Twitter. Literature has shown that Twitter—rather than Facebook—influences journalistic sourcing and selection practices (Broersma and Graham 2012; Parmelee 2013b; Ross and Burger 2014). Politicians anticipate news coverage by adapting the content and style of their Twitter messages to appeal to journalists. Particular reference is made to the *conflict* frame, which is argued to be increasingly related to political news coverage (Blumler 2014). Simultaneously, politicians wish to refrain from too stringent statements in order to avoid bad publicity. As a female candidate (42, the Christian Democrats) argued: “*I need to be a little bit more blunt and outspoken on Twitter, without attacking or insulting people.*” Politicians want to critically address the viewpoints of the political opponents, but they do not want to insult potential coalition partners as in party-centered systems as Belgium competitors might become allies. In other words, politicians co-define to what extent they wish to adhere to the conflict frame (at least concerning the messages they send out themselves). This is illustrated in the ways they use the platform. More specifically, politicians redistribute critique on opponents that comes from higher profile party members, opinion leaders, or mainstream media (as independent watchdogs). In addition to these “indirect” forms of criticism,

politicians use reply messages to debate with rival candidates, as *@replies* move the conversation “to the more intimate micro layer” of Twitter (Bruns and Moe 2014, p. 21). Reply messages have lower visibility and are more difficult to interpret independently from the larger discussion. In turn, this decreases potential controversy and bad publicity (in mainstream media), which might follow these online discussions.

### *Attempts to Reverse Engineer Virality*

In their book on online virality, Nahon and Hemsley (2013) argue that amateur content can go viral online if it taps into emotions as humor or unexpectedness. Related, politicians argue that virality can compensate for their lower profile (and related, their lack of attention in mainstream media). Research in the Netherlands has shown that journalists often select the same politicians’ tweets, whereas others are only covered once or twice (Broersma and Graham 2012). Twitter is not perceived to offer counterbalance to the mainstream media’s disposition to provide access to the already powerful elites (Tresch 2009). As the quote below shows, “going viral” might be an alternative route to retrieve coverage in mainstream media.

You need to be somewhat well-known to get your message across. When you are ranked number four on the election list, you know it’s unlikely your tweets will get picked up by journalists. Unless of course, you can go viral by being original and innovative on Twitter (M, 33, the Flemish nationalist party)

Twitter is considered an awareness system for journalists in which viral messages are very visible (Hermida 2010). In addition, virality links up to the news value *humor* and its potential for a punning headline (Harcup and O’Neill 2001). Whereas participants acknowledge this, they equally point to lack of skills to “go viral” in practice.

Another participant (M, 37, right-wing extremist party) referred to the use of dedicated hashtags during off-line events (e.g., party congresses) to raise awareness, or in his words, “*make the hashtag trending*.” During the interview he denounced the party’s lack of attention in mainstream media. More specifically, traditional news media in Belgium limit the party’s media presence, applying a *cordon mediatique*, which is an extension of the other parties’ agreement not to cooperate with “Vlaams Belang” (*cordon sanitaire*).

Both cases show that politicians try to “reverse engineer” Twitter’s trending topic algorithm as they perceive this can impact coverage in mainstream media.

## ***Towards Infinite Judgment?***

Scholars predominantly (and largely rightfully) understand social media as means to reconnect politicians and citizens (e.g., Graham et al. 2013; Klinger 2014). Simultaneously, as the quote below shows, the increase in visibility and accessibility proves challenging for politicians.

Sometimes I think it can't get any more intense. My fear is that communication gets very ephemeral. That we basically don't remember what happened in the morning. I am a little bit cautious about the impact on the political debate and political action. (M, 51, the Flemish nationalist party)

This rather pessimistic view resonates with Dean's (2003) "ideology of publicity." She takes a critical stance towards the alleged visibility ICTs provide and their presumed indispensability for democracy. The abundance of information and continuous, conflicting updates result in uninformed, unsure, and infinite judgment. Politicians equally take part in the acceleration of the information cycle, via "quick" comments "*closely linked to the political news of the day*" (M, 59, the Green party). In turn, they argue that these Twitter messages might influence the media agenda as they resonate with the news values *timeliness* and *topicality*, which have been acknowledged to influence coverage of Twitter messages (Broersma and Graham 2012; Parmelee 2013b).

Citizens equally comment and question politicians' utterances in mainstream media as well as on social media. However, politicians do not (always) feel like responding. Nevertheless, they spontaneously justify their lack of interactivity on social media, thereby confirming that it defines as "*appropriate action*" (Esser and Strömbäck 2014). In general, politicians agree that they can ignore citizen comments if they are insulting, but they do make an effort to respond to substantial policy-related issues, campaigning practicalities, and acknowledgements of supporters or voters. In addition, on Twitter, discussions with citizens often include other actors, such as opinion leaders or journalists (via a multi-turn @reply chain). The inclusion of these established actors provides an extra incentive for politicians to interact. Further, concerning nonestablished users, one of the politicians used "follower count" as a selection criterion, arguing that it is more productive to respond to users that have a larger network on Twitter as this increases message reach. However, not all politicians are that instrumental, as others respond to one in two (or more) messages to reduce the load but still present an accessible image.

## ***Negotiating the Goldfish***

Politicians report that social media allow them to present an accessible and "ordinary" self. In a similar manner, Enli and Skogerbø (2013) concluded that social media, and Facebook in particular, are personalized marketing tools. However, most of our participants were reluctant to reveal their private lives, as the close

reading of their messages showed very little evidence of their nonprofessional lives (e.g., pictures of friends and family). In order to appear more familiar and in touch with voters (cf. “humanization,” Holtz-Bacha 2004), politicians use social media for campaigning updates, including “peeks behind the scenes.” The latter tell the story of the life of a politician during election times, often supported by picture material (e.g., the preparation of particular off-line campaign events). These posts were common for all participants, which resonates with content analytical studies on politicians’ campaigning activities on social media (Larsson 2015).

Politicians do acknowledge that sharing personal information is more rewarding, in terms of likes and comments. The quote below exemplifies our previous discussion and shows the candidate’s reluctance to follow Facebook’s “*metrics as a guide*” (Grosser 2014) for future behavior.

Most of my Facebook posts are about politics. I avoid posting personal stuff. I’ll share a picture of a goldfish, but that is about it. It is a bit strange that the gold fish post generates comments and likes. I guess it makes me more human or something. On the other hand, if I only look at message reach, you are very limited in what you can share. After all, I am a politician, and although some posts are indeed playful and popular, it does not mean you can’t post anything else. (F, 42, the Christian Democrats)

Whereas politicians control the boundaries between their public and private lives, they do present their political messages in accordance with what “works” online. In other words, audience feedback in terms of likes, shares, or other influences their behavior, which in turn shapes the algorithms via which content is structured on social media. This is exemplified by the quote below.

When I am out campaigning or taking part in a political debate, I’ll take a picture and upload it on Facebook. Overall, I will post photos on my page, rather than text. People prefer visual content over text. In addition, photo posts generate more comments and likes too. Especially when your text post contains five lines or more. (M, 37, the right-wing extremist party)

Metrics predominantly serve to gauge message reach, rather than the evaluation of their online images. For example, likes are defined as “attention” and retweets are more valuable than favorites as the former increase message reach. Facebook Fan Pages in particular provide the most extensive audience metrics. Pages are distinct from personal profiles, as Facebook supports pages with insights on the page visitors (such as demographics) and the posted messages (such as reach and shares).<sup>1</sup> Audience demographics are a valuable addition to the behavioral statistics social media provide, as politicians aim to reach “the wider audience.” However, as we argue below audience diversity is challenging on social media.

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<sup>1</sup>Page Post Metrics, <https://www.facebook.com/help/336143376466063/> (accessed 3 June 2015).

## *Audience Selectivity and Targetability*

Twitter content and network analyses have shown that politicians often communicate with other politicians, and party member in particular (Ausserhofer and Maireder 2013; Plotkowiak and Stanoevska-Slabeva 2013; Thimm et al. 2014; D'heer and Verdegem 2014). Our participants endorse these findings, as they describe that their personal networks of friends and followers on Twitter and Facebook contain a lot of colleague-politicians. In campaigning times, candidates act as “networked individuals” (Wellman et al. 2003), connecting with colleagues through one’s personal set of followers and friends, via shares, retweets, tags, and mentions. Whereas personal networks can be put into practice to (attempt to) enlarge one’s visibility on the network, politicians simultaneously acknowledge the self-selective nature of social media activity.

Facebook friends but also Twitter followers include party members, sympathizers, and supporters. As one of the interviewees stated: “*Social media are for a large part in-crowd*” (F, 35, the Flemish nationalist party). For Twitter in particular, “in-crowd” reflects the type of users that are present. Twitter is conceived as a political arena in which politicians (both colleagues and rivals), journalists, pundits, and experts have their place. In short, politicians argue that these people already know who to vote for.

In comparison, Facebook networks are more diverse and closer to what politicians define as “common people” (i.e., non-elite and nonexpert). Related, Facebook is understood as a “friendly space” (Enli and Skogerbø 2013), due to its usage as a campaigning tool as well as a platform for personal contact with friends and family. In this respect, even more so than Twitter, it contains supporters and sympathizers.

However, politicians who own a Facebook Fan Page “boost posts” so they become visible *beyond* one’s personal fan base, based on self-defined audience characteristics.<sup>2</sup> Participants particularly point to the geographical demarcation of the audience, which is related to the organization of the elections in Belgium via voting districts. Hence, politicians tap into the “datafication” (van Dijck 2014) of user behavior on Facebook to target very specific audiences that go beyond their personal fan base. These are very modest signs of what Tufekci (2014) defines as “computational politics,” which opens a new range of questions on data access, surveillance, and privacy.

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<sup>2</sup>Boosting your posts <https://www.facebook.com/business/help/547448218658012/> (accessed 3 June 2015).



## Concluding Remarks

This chapter shows the ambivalent role of social media in politicians' campaigning activities. We integrated new readings of the concept of media logic, focusing on the characteristics of social media, in order to understand transformations in political communication "*without resorting to either technological determinism or normalization*" (Klinger and Svensson 2014, p. 1242). We outlined a non-exhaustive number of relevant features that characterize contemporary media environment, following Chadwick's (2013) analysis of today's "hybrid media system" in which older and newer media logics collide.

Notwithstanding the interviewees' experience with and interest in social media, we acknowledge the *relative* importance of these tools. In Belgium, the fairly small electoral districts offer incentives for personal contact and local relations as well. Further, Belgium is characterized by a multi-party system and a political culture characterized by compromise. In addition, we also acknowledge that traditional modes of communication (such as television or newspapers) are still important in Belgium, which is in accordance with a cross-national EU study on election campaigns (Lilleker et al. 2014). In particular, public service broadcasting is well established. Related, the visibility of politicians' private lives on social media is very limited, which is consistent with the way they perceive their presentation in traditional media (Driessens et al. 2010). The Belgian case serves an interesting add-on to other more often studied EU countries, such as Norway (e.g., Larsson 2015) or Germany (e.g., Jungherr 2014).

Following, we revise the scenarios outlined in the introduction in the light of our empirical findings. More specifically, we questioned to what extent social media generate new dependencies and/or alter the relation between politicians and mainstream media. In sum, we acknowledge evidence in favor of all scenarios, whereby we understand the relation between (social) media and politics as one of mutual dependency (Strömbäck and Esser 2009).

This study encountered a number of ways politicians use social media to reach a wider audience. First, politicians tailor their activities to retrieve mainstream media coverage, drawing on conventional selection mechanisms such as news values (e.g., conflict, humor, or topicality). In addition, they tap into mechanisms indigenous to social media, such as virality, to reach journalists. This exemplifies the fusion of old and new logics in contemporary media environment, as not only tweets as such but also platform popularity metrics can be newsworthy. Efforts to appeal to journalists are contingent upon politicians' profile, as less prominent politicians and members of the right-wing extremist party feel that more effort is needed to appeal to journalists. In Flanders, the right-wing extremist party is marginalized in the mainstream media; hence, they feel the need to put additional effort in attracting attention.

On the other hand, politicians encounter the challenges of audience reach on social media. The transformation of visibility, originally attributed to mainstream media (Thompson 2000), further intensifies in a hybrid media environment. Both

the inclusion of citizen viewpoints and politicians' online activities intensify the struggle over the legitimacy of one's viewpoints. Or as Coleman (2011, p. 54) argues: "*Where, within the ubiquity of democratic surveillance, can political practices hitherto confined to the back room be conducted?*" In this context, the continuous nature of communication not only challenges the presentational side of politics, but also pressures the divide between the political decision-making process and presentational politics. The challenge of this intensified media environment is particularly apparent for older and less "social media-savvy" politicians (rather than being related to party membership or status).

Further, we acknowledge that the "datafication" (van Dijck 2014) of users' online behavior provides politicians with detailed feedback guiding future behavior. Here we have to distinguish between user activity and user profile information. First, politicians tailor their online messages to what "works" online (e.g., visuals, graphs, and short paragraphs). Second, they tap into user profile information, available through Facebook, to increase message reach beyond their personal, self-selective networks. Hence, in addition to the content and network analyses of politicians' social media activities, we want to understand how politicians co-shape and tap into the algorithmic processes that characterize content curation on social media.

In sum, the complexity of the current media environment, in which mainstream media and social media logics have their place, needs further conceptual work and empirical research to advance our understanding of the consequences for political communication and in extension democracy at large. We hereby embrace the concept of social media logic as it meets concerns with respect to the uniformity of a singular media logic (Couldry 2008). However, we equally acknowledge existential differences between both logics, as social media logic focuses on technology (and its affordances), whereas media logic takes an institutionalist perspective. Hence, conceptual (in)congruence between both logics is yet to be fully explored.

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# Chapter 8

## The Personal in the Political on Twitter: Towards a Typology of Politicians’ Personalized Tweeting Behaviours

Todd Graham, Daniel Jackson, and Marcel Broersma

### Introduction

On hearing of his re-election as President in 2012, Barack Obama’s first public announcement was to tweet thanks to the American electorate. Shortly thereafter, he posted a jubilant declaration of ‘4 more years’, accompanied by a picture of the first couple in each other’s arms. Almost immediately, this became the most popular tweet of all time, with over 740,000 retweets.

Whilst Obama is far from an ordinary politician, for us this moment encapsulates two key trends in contemporary political communication. The first is personalization, and more specifically the intimization or privatization of politics: the idea that leading politicians in Western democracies have not only become recognizable performers but also ‘intimate strangers’, wherein their private lives have slowly come to be considered an acceptable subject of journalistic revelation and self-disclosure (Stanyer 2012; Van Aelst et al. 2012, 2017). The second is that social media appears to be a boon for this process because it represents a semi-public, semi-private space for self-presentation. Not only are borders between offline personal and online-mediated relations easily blurred (Enli and Thumim 2012),

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but even more crucially, it allows politicians themselves more control over this (Broersma and Graham 2016).

Although studies of personalization in politics and online campaigning have been popular avenues of research in the last 20 years, an empirically led understanding of the nexus between the two is still underdeveloped, at least with respect to Twitter. In this chapter, through an explorative analysis of the ‘personal’ tweeting behaviours of British and Dutch candidates in the 2010 general elections, we therefore try to understand how politicians in two advanced Western democracies attempt to disclose aspects of the private life through social media and how such personalized tweeting behaviour is (strategically) mixed with the ‘political’.

In the next section of this chapter, we begin exploring the concept of personalization and discuss its rise within political communication research. We then focus on the relationship between social media and personalization and discuss some of the trends in this area. This is followed by a discussion of the aims of the study and the methodological approach employed to carry out those aims. Here we spend some time discussing our coding scheme in hopes that it may be useful for future research. We then present our findings and investigate how the personal is intermingled with the ‘political’. We end the chapter by setting out a typology of tweeting behaviour in relation to personalization and discuss what this might mean for political representation more broadly.

## Personalization

For even the most casual observers of contemporary politics, the process of personalization in politics—in the most general sense—will be familiar. In most Western democracies, emphasis has shifted from political parties and ideologies to individual politicians and their personal qualities (Van Aelst et al. 2017). In addition, voters will be used to seeing leading politicians reveal aspects of their personal life through (auto)biographies, talk-show appearances, personal websites and, more recently, social media. However, personalization is a multilayered concept that cuts through the behaviour of voters, political actors and the media (Karvonen 2010; Rahat and Sheaffer 2007). Whereas in the past voters might have been most influenced by party policies or their views on the party itself, there is evidence that voters are increasingly basing their vote on their image of the party leader (Brettschneider 2002; see also Clarke et al. 2004). This process is arguably facilitated by the weakening of traditional affective ties between voters and parties (Mair 2005), alongside the broader shift towards consumer culture that many Western countries have witnessed, that favours individualism over collective identities (Bauman 1999; Bennett 1998).

Meanwhile, politicians and parties themselves are apparently pursuing more personalized, candidate-centred campaigns and placing their leader at the centre of campaign communication strategy (Corner 2000, 2003; Gulati 2004; Pels 2003; Van Santen and Van Zoonen 2009; Zittel 2015). For their part, contemporary

politicians are argued to be attempting to cultivate a three-dimensional public persona—one that combines both competence and professionalism with ordinariness (Langer 2007). In doing so, ‘political representatives have become increasingly interested in utilizing personalizing techniques designed to give humane substance to hitherto impersonal and abstract relationships’ (Coleman 2011). Then the media, led by the personalizing logic of the dominant technology of its age—television—is framing electoral politics increasingly through the lens of individual leaders over collectives (Mazzoleni 2000; Van Aelst et al. 2017; Wiorkowski and Holtz-Bacha 2005), with commonly accepted news values favouring stories that are personalized over those that aren’t (e.g. Harcup and O’Neill 2001). Given the symbiosis between politics, media and citizens, it is difficult to say which is the driving force behind personalization in politics, especially given some of the broader cultural changes at play (see Schulz et al. 2005). But that there are elements of personalization occurring in contemporary politics is largely agreed, even if some dispute whether it is as ‘new’ as others claim (Adam and Maier 2010).

Our focus in this chapter is on electoral candidates and personalization. Here, again, there is a need to unravel the term. As Stanyer (2012) argues, personalization has been understood in a limited way by scholars, since—he argues—the ‘majority of studies conducted on personalization do not deal with the flows of information and imagery about politicians’ private lives’. Of the relatively few studies that have examined personalization in political communications, they have tended to focus on either how candidate or leader-centred campaigns are through analyses of campaign advertising (e.g. Hodess et al. 2000; Holtz-Bacha 2000; Johnston and Kaid 2002), or the extent that campaign strategies emphasize the personal attributes of candidates such as competence, leadership, credibility and morality (e.g. Holtz-Bacha 2000; Holtz-Bacha et al. 1998). We are thus still missing a deeper understanding of the more private or intimate aspects of politicians’ lives that they may choose to disclose.

Alongside the similar concepts of privatization (e.g. Van Aelst et al. 2012) and ‘personalization of the private persona’ (Langer 2007, 2010), we find the concept of intimization to be particularly relevant here (Stanyer 2012; see also Van Zoonen 1993). For Stanyer (2012), intimization reflects three domains of politicians’ lives: ‘exposure of information and imagery about the politician as a person; the public scrutiny of personal relationships and family life; and the opening up of personal living spaces or spaces a politician might reasonably expect to be private from the public gaze’. Our present understanding of the levels of intimization in political communication is limited to analyses of media coverage of politicians (Holtz-Bacha et al. 2014; Langer 2007, 2010; Rahat and Sheaffer 2007; Stanyer 2012). We know far less about how they might be strategically (or indeed spontaneously) sharing aspects of their private life through their own communication channels.



## Social Media and Personalization

Social media is now a central part of the media ecology, and an important tool for politicians seeking to represent their electorate or get elected. As such, we have seen a plethora of studies that examine social media use in election contexts, particularly Twitter (for an overview see Jungherr 2016; Vergeer 2015). Beyond the usual hype surrounding new and social media, many of these studies have found politicians to adopt a conservative approach to new platforms, typically favouring broadcasting over interactive behaviours, and networking with other elites over citizens (Bruns and Highfield 2013; Golbeck et al. 2010; Graham et al. 2013b, 2016; Kruike-meier 2014; Larsson and Moe 2011, 2013; Small 2010). Most of these studies are concerned with questions regarding which variables influence adoption rates and use among politicians and parties (Vergeer and Hermans 2013; Vergeer et al. 2011, 2013); the functions that tweets may assume (Graham et al. 2013b, 2016; Small 2010); with whom politicians interact (Graham et al. 2013b, 2016; Larsson and Ihlen 2015); political networks on Twitter (Bruns and Highfield 2013; Ausserhofer and Maireder 2013; Verweij 2012; Larsson and Moe 2011, 2013); whether visibility on Twitter relates to mass media visibility (Broersma and Graham 2012, 2013; Harder et al. 2016) and of course if tweeting behaviour is linked to electoral success (Jacobs and Spierings 2014).

In this study, we take a novel approach and examine how social media is facilitating the process of intimization in politics, i.e. how politicians are using Twitter to disclose/share information about their private life or personal interests/experiences. Twitter provides an easy, convenient and controllable way of communicating personality or hinterland, which is not reliant on media coverage but controlled by the sender. It allows politicians to shift seamlessly between their public and private personas, and encourages voters to develop an empathy with the politician as an ordinary human being (Jackson and Lilleker 2011). The affordances and social norms of/on Twitter, such as sharing and self-disclosure, are in line with the process of intimization and create, as Marwick and Boyd argue (2011), 'a new expectation of intimacy'. Moreover, where the sender is the politicians themselves, Twitter offers an authenticity to the communication process that promises a break from the staid, formulaic and on-message pronouncements the party machine imposes on much political communication. For a political class who nowadays struggle to inspire confidence in their sincerity and trustworthiness, microblogging provides an opportunity to adopt communicative strategies that might reduce the apparent disconnection between politicians and those they (claim to) represent (see Coleman 2011; Coleman and Blumler 2009; Coleman and Moss 2008; Graham et al. 2013a; Wright 2008, 2009).

Understanding what politicians are posting and how they are interacting on Twitter are important questions because recent research has shown that certain online campaign strategies and forms of communication (i.e. the use of Twitter's interactive features and personal communication) are effective for attracting and involving citizens (Lee and Oh 2012; Lee and Shin 2012, 2014). Experimental

research here has shown that interactive and personal communicative strategies can facilitate a sense of (imagined) intimacy and (emotional) closeness. In the Netherlands, for example, Kruikemeier's et al. (2013) found that candidates who combined personalization with higher interactivity triggered the highest levels of perceived closeness (see also Utz 2009). Moreover, such forms of communication may lead to more votes. Research on the 2010 and 2012 Dutch general elections suggests that interactivity and personal communication via Twitter have positive consequences in the voting booth, (potentially) leading to more preferential votes for a candidate (Kruikemeier 2014; Kruikemeier et al. 2015; Spierings and Jacobs 2014).

However, the extent to which politicians are actually engaging in interactive and personal communicative forms with citizens is still unknown. Earlier research suggests that politicians are employing a personal approach online via their websites (e.g. Stanyer 2008), weblogs (e.g. Auty 2005; Jackson 2008) and, more recently, social networking sites (e.g. Enli and Skogerbø 2013). But there have only been a handful of studies that have investigated the content of politicians' tweets where some element of personalization was taken into account. Studies here have found that politicians commonly tweet personal content, giving an insight into their everyday lives, as well as their political positions (Golbeck et al. 2010; Graham et al. 2013a, 2016; Jackson and Lilleker 2011; Sæbø 2011; Small 2010). However previous studies do not go into any great depth regarding personalization with some notable exceptions. For example, McGregor et al.'s (2016) analysis of social media use by American gubernatorial candidates in 2014 found that personalizing communication made up 7.9% of their Twitter and Facebook posts. Similarly, Meeks's (2016) analysis of US Senate candidates' Twitter feeds during the 2012 general elections revealed that 11.8% of their tweets included some form of personalization. However, the research here is limited. It focuses primarily on American elections, which differ greatly from the British and Dutch electoral systems. Moreover, such studies don't explicitly focus on how the personal is intermingled with the 'political'.

## Research Focus and Methodology

Our aim is to help fill this gap by investigating politicians' personalized communicative practices via Twitter, how these manifest and what this tells us about personalization and campaigning in the age of social media. In line with Van Aelst et al.'s (2012) personal life dimension of personalization, this study defines personalization as when a candidate shares information about their private life or personal interests or experiences. This case study focuses on the exploration of personalization practices rather than theory testing or drawing generalizations. As such, we address the following research questions:

*RQ1. What personal topics do candidates tweet about?*

*RQ2. Which Twitter communicative modes (i.e. singleton, @reply, retweet, and retweet with comment) are most prominent when conveying the personal?*

*RQ3. With whom do candidates interact when sharing the personal?*

*RQ4. How is the personal mixed with the political?*

The analysis presented here is based on an earlier study of British and Dutch tweeting behaviour during the 2010 election campaigns (Graham et al. 2013b, 2016). This included a (manual) content analysis of tweets (UK:  $n = 26,282$ ; NL:  $n = 28,045$ ) from all tweeting candidates from national, seat-holding parties (UK:  $n = 416$ ; NL:  $n = 206$ ), which were posted during the final 2 weeks of the campaigns (including polling days). One of the analytical focuses of the study was on tweets where candidates shared aspects of their private life or personal interests/experiences.

Based on this initial analysis we identified candidates with the most personal tweets—the top ten from each election—who were selected for a more detailed analysis (see Table 8.1 for an overview of the candidates). This represents 3.2% of the total number of candidates, but 19.4% of the total number of tweets identified in the first part of the study. Our sample for this study consisted of 10,556 tweets taken from these 20 candidates.

Who were these candidates? As Table 8.1 shows, there was an equal gender split and a range of incumbents/challengers (in the UK system) and those from various party list positions (Dutch system). Age, however, would appear to be key, with our sample's average age (37.5 for UK, 36 for the Netherlands) considerably younger than the average age for MPs in the respective countries (approximately 50). For our UK sample especially, this might correlate with the fact that none of our ten candidates could be considered senior front-line politicians (such as party leaders, senior ministers or shadow ministers). In the Dutch case however, as well as containing some relative unknowns, our top ten also contains a party leader and three current or former ministers.

Our sample tweeted more prolifically than the average candidate, with an average of 527 tweets per candidate over the 15-day sample period, which compares to 136 (the Netherlands) and 63 (UK) for our broader sample. They were also more interactive than the average candidate, with @replies accounting for 63% of all tweets compared to 47% (the Netherlands) and 32% (UK) for our larger sample of all candidates. What we are looking at in this chapter, then, are a group of relatively young candidates who are tweeting and interacting on the platform significantly more than the average candidate. As such, whilst we should be wary of making sweeping conclusions based on this sample of 20 candidates, they do provide a compelling sample of politicians to examine in more detail how the practices of personalized political communication play out on Twitter.

A (manual) content analysis was employed as the primary instrument for investigation. The unit of analysis was the individual tweet, and the context unit of analysis was the feed in which it was situated. All tweets ( $N = 10,556$ ) were first coded for whether they shared aspects of their private life or personal interests/experiences, whether as a stand-alone (purely *personal*) or related to the campaign or politics more broadly (*mixed*) (RQ4), as the examples below illustrate:

**Table 8.1** Overview of the population of the study

British	Sex	Age	Party	Incumbent/ Party list #	Tweet count	Following	Followers
Evan Harris	M	44	Liberal Democrats	Yes	1342	501	7039
Daisy Benson	F	28	Liberal Democrats	No	697	1126	1488
Chris Wiggin	M	24	Liberal Democrats	No	674	613	644
Tom Watson	M	43	Labour	Yes	463	2266	10,873
Louise Mensch	F	38	Conservatives	No	422	2306	3327
Maryam Khan	F	27	Labour	No	330	100	854
Andrew Gwynne	M	35	Labour	Yes	324	298	1574
Eric Joyce	M	49	Labour	Yes	284	661	1692
Karen Chilvers	F	39	Liberal Democrats	No	184	746	460
Andrew Skudder	M	48	Labour	No	83	54	120
Dutch					4803	8671	28,071
Jeanine Hennis- Plasschaert	F	36	VVD	4	760	3067	6431
Onno Aerden	M	43	VVD	47	735	756	408
Klaas Dijhoff	M	29	VVD	27	685	1831	2147
Femke Halsema	F	43	GL	1	655	482	66,413
Erwin Hoogland	M	46	VVD	67	628	365	229
Petra Borst	F	33	VVD	61	566	414	484
Mei Li Vos	F	40	PvdA	38	518	182	9482
Marije van den Berg	F	36	PvdA	50	433	1113	1206
Daan de Neef	M	29	VVD	56	393	238	105
Yang Soo Kloosterhof	M	27	CDA	74	380	425	343
					5753	8873	87,248

Note: VVD stands for Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie (People's Party for Freedom and Democracy), a conservative-liberal party; GL stands for GroenLinks (Green Party); PvdA stands for Partij van de Arbeid, the Labour Party; CDA stands for Christen-Democratisch Appèl (Christian Democratic Appeal), a Christian-democratic party

### Personal

In the St. Mauritius Church in Marsum. My sister is player the marimba. It's a beautiful and special instrument. *Yang Soo Kloosterhof (CDA)*

2562 makes such great music. Even on a Sunday morning at 08:55 it makes you want to dance. *Marije van den Berg (PvdA)*

### Mixed

Can't wait for my beautiful sister to hit the campaign with me again - love her so much-my earth angel xx :o) *Maryam Khan (Labour)*

good run this morning. First campaign of the day, coffee morning in Aldwincle *Louise Mensch (Conservatives)*

These tweets were subsequently classified using four additional coding categories: one original for this study and three taken from the coding carried out in our previous analysis mentioned above.

First, we identified the topic of personal tweets (for both personal and mixed tweets, RQ1). This initially included 18 topics, which were developed based on a pilot study carried during the construction of the coding manual. However, these were eventually consolidated into 12 topics (mainly due to the infrequency of particular codes). Table 8.2 provides a (brief) overview of the coding definitions, which we hope might inform future studies. We should note that where tweets contained more than one personal topic, each tweet was coded for the *dominant* topic, i.e. one of the 12 personal topic codes.

For the remaining categories, the coding from the aforementioned original analysis was used. First, the *type of tweet* was identified (RQ2): Was personal information shared via *singletons* (normal post), *@replies*, *retweets* or *retweets with comments*? Second, all those personal tweets coded as *@replies* were subsequently coded for with whom candidates were interacting (RQ3), i.e. who were candidates replying to or directing their tweets towards. Finally, all mixed tweets were subsequently coded for their political function, and dominant (political) behaviour (RQ4). This included ten functions such as *campaign promotion*, *own/party stance* and *critique* (listed in Table 8.5).

The coding for this part of the study was carried out by a team of four coders. In addition to one coding trainer (Peter and Lauf 2002), three additional coders were trained over multiple training sessions and assigned to code approximately a fourth of the sample each. As noted above, three of the five coding categories are from the initial analysis; a more detailed discussion on the reliability of these categories can be found in Graham et al. (2016). Calculated using Cohen's Kappa, coefficients met appropriate acceptance levels (Viera and Garrett 2005), ranging from .66 to .97.

**Table 8.2** Personal topics

Topic	Definition
Friends & chatter	Tweets where a candidate shares information about hanging out with friends, meeting friends, going out with friends, etc. This also includes greetings; chatting about the weather; chitchat and banter; and non-political jokes.
Family life	This includes tweets about the family and home life, e.g. time spent with family such as having dinner and vacation. This also includes tweets about candidates' children, e.g. parenting, children's sayings and remarkable achievements; tweets about pets and their well-being; and tweets that have anything to do with marriage, romantic relationships or love life.
Hobbies & interests	This includes tweets about activities done regularly in a candidate's leisure time for pleasure, e.g. engaging in creative activities and collecting objects. This includes tweets about technology, gadgets, social media and the technology in general. It also includes tweets about interests in general. Note that tweets about TV series, books, music and films are NOT coded here, but under the code <i>Film, TV, music &amp; books</i> below.
Film, TV, music & books	This includes tweets about popular and high culture, which includes tweets about (favourite) TV series, TV programs and movies; (favourite) music, bands, performances, recordings, etc.; and literature, arts, and culture. Regarding the latter, this includes the sharing of (favourite) books and authors; favourite artists; and likes and dislikes regarding art and culture.
Health & well-being	This includes tweets about health, fitness, prosperity, happiness and other topics concerning well-being. Note that references to spirituality and religion are coded under <i>Religion &amp; spirituality</i> below.
Religion & spirituality	This includes tweets about spirituality or religious beliefs, e.g. when a candidate states that he/she is going to church.
Food & drink	This includes tweets concerning food and drinks (e.g. favourite beer, food, recipes).
Fashion & beauty	This includes tweets about style: clothing, make-up, hair and current fashion in general. This also includes tweets about what a candidate is wearing, their hairstyle, etc.
Past life & upbringing	This includes tweets about upbringing, childhood, previous careers, etc. This also includes tweets about current jobs (non-political)—talk about their non-political work life.
Sports	This includes tweets about (favourite) sports, sport teams, cheering, being a fan and playing sports. This also includes factual information such as scores and sports news.
Places, travel & events	Tweets about travel and holidays (excluding <i>Family Life</i> ); festivals, favourite cities; places to visit; etc.
Other	Tweets that do not fit under any of the other topics above.

Rule: A tweet may have multiple topics. When this is the case, code the tweet for the dominant topic. When in doubt, select the topic comprising the most characters

**Table 8.3** Tweet topics (%)

	British ( <i>N</i> = 786)	Dutch ( <i>N</i> = 1239)	Total ( <i>N</i> = 2025)
Friends & chatter	35.8	58.9	49.9
Film, TV, music & books	13.9	12.3	12.9
Family life	14.8	3.8	8.0
Food & drink	8.4	5.3	6.5
Hobbies & interests	6.4	5.0	5.5
Places, events & travel	3.7	3.5	3.6
Health & well-being	4.7	2.0	3.1
Past life & upbringing	3.8	2.0	2.7
Fashion & beauty	4.1	1.4	2.4
Religion & spirituality	0.0	3.1	1.9
Sports	3.2	1.0	1.9
Other	1.4	1.5	1.5

## Findings

Our 20 candidates were responsible for 2025 personal tweets (mean = 101.3; median = 91.0; standard deviation = 49.9) over the 15-day sample period. It seems that sharing aspects of one's personal life was relatively common among these politicians, accounting for nearly a fifth of their tweets (19.2%). That said, Dutch candidates were more personal than British candidates were, representing 21.5% of their tweets compared to 16.4% for British candidates. The Dutch too averaged 123.9 personal tweets per candidate (median = 72.5; standard deviation = 46.1)—nearly 9 per day—compared to 78.6 tweets for British candidates (median = 121.5; standard deviation = 44.9), an average of 5.6 per day. Seven Dutch candidates posted 100 plus personal tweets—Borst (VVD) 182; de Neef (PvdA) 178; Hennis-Plasschaert (VVD) 171; van den Berg (PvdA) 133; Hoogland (VVD) 145; Vos (PvdA) 108; and Aerden (VVD) 104—during the final 2 weeks of the campaign.

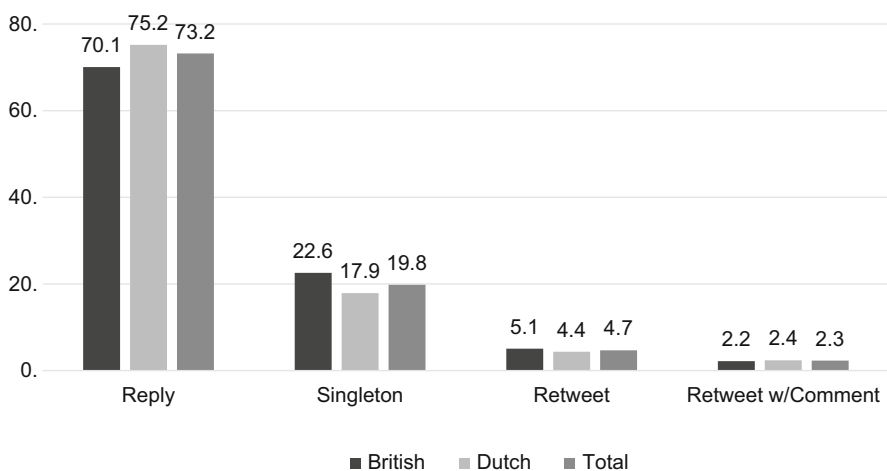
Our current knowledge of the content of politicians' tweets in light of personalization is based on a single, catch-all 'personal' coding category (see, e.g., Evans et al. 2014; Graham et al. 2016; McGregor et al. 2016; Small 2010). However, such an approach does not allow us to investigate which 'personal' topics are more prevalent among politicians. The ambition of RQ1 was therefore to document this in detail for the first time. As Table 8.3 shows, *Friends & chatter* was by far the most common topic, representing half of personal tweets. This primarily consisted of greetings, chitchat and banter with followers. These were chiefly interactive tweets (@replies) and emerged in conversation with others. *Film, TV, music & books* was another popular topic among both groups of candidates, accounting for 12.9% of personal tweets. One trend that did emerge, which was particularly prominent when tweeting about popular culture, was dual screening (see Vaccari et al. 2015)—the use of Twitter for (live) commenting on TV series (and to a lesser

extent on *Sports*)—as the example below of Petra Borst watching and commenting on the Eurovision Song Contest illustrates:

Sieneke could have beat that German duck. But she's the second favourite with the bookmakers? I Guess I'm crazy. *Petra Borst (VVD)*

The predominance of friends and chatter over every other topic is of some significance when considered in the wider media and political communication landscape. Up to this point, politicians have strategically used media and communication tools to communicate aspects of hinterland and everydayness—whether this is through chat-show appearances, election adverts or autobiographies (see Stanyer 2012). Here, we might typically learn about their family life, hobbies and interests, religion, upbringing and so on. With Twitter, it appears that many of these candidates are less concerned with communicating these kinds of personal matters, and instead embracing the spontaneous nature of the platform. We did see differences between the two cases though; British candidates tweeted about a more diverse set of personal topics than Dutch candidates did. British candidates too offered the most far-reaching aspect of privatization by allowing voters a glimpse into their family life, which accounted for 14.8% of their personal tweets, much of which seemed staged as we will discuss below.

Which communicative features were most prominent when conveying the personal (RQ2)? As Fig. 8.1 shows, in both cases personal tweets were primarily conveyed via the @reply feature, accounting for 73.2% of personal tweets as opposed to 61.3% for non-personal, political tweets. The real contrast, though, is with the larger sample of all candidates—where the proportion of @replies was 39%—alongside previous literature that has found broadcasting to typically overshadow interactive tweeting strategies (Evans et al. 2014; Golbeck et al. 2010;



**Fig. 8.1** Communicative form of personal tweets (%)



**Table 8.4** With whom were politicians interacting via personal tweets (%)?

	British ( <i>N</i> = 551)	Dutch ( <i>N</i> = 932)	Total ( <i>N</i> = 1483)
Citizens	61.0	68.8	65.9
Politicians	12.9	15.1	14.3
Journalists	10.7	12.1	11.6
Celebrities	4.2	2.0	2.8
Party activists	6.9	0.1	2.6
Lobbyists	2.5	0.9	1.5
Industry	1.1	0.2	0.5
Experts	0.7	0.2	0.4

Graham et al. 2013b, 2016; Kruijemeier 2014; Small 2010). In our case study, sharing personal information tended to be an interactive affair.

Staying with @replies, we can examine with whom candidates were sharing personal information when they were interacting on Twitter (RQ3). As Table 8.4 reveals, candidates primarily shared aspects of their private lives in conversation with members of the public, which accounted for 65.9% of @reply tweets. In both countries, sharing personal information with fellow politicians—typically from the same party—and journalists were the next two most common groups, representing slightly more than a quarter of personal tweets (25.9%). There were some minor differences between the two cases. British shared personal information via @replies with a set of slightly more diverse groups; for example party activists account for 6.9% compared to 0.1% for the Dutch. But the standout finding remains that these candidates are not exchanging personal information within a bubble of elites, but in conversations with members of the public (see also Larsson and Ihlen 2015), which runs contrary to some network analysis research (Bruns and Highfield 2013; Larsson and Moe 2011, 2013; Verweij 2012).

We also coded tweets for the mixing of personal information with political issues (RQ4). There were 2025 personal tweets in our sample; 18.7% (*N* = 379) were mixed tweets, as the example below illustrates:

Went to visit my grandma (93) for coffee. I won't repeat her analysis of Wilders, but in one word it was: "Dangerous". *Erwin Hoogland (VVD)*

As the example suggests, mixing the personal with the political seemed to be more strategic and planned as opposed to something that was spontaneous and immediate. This is based on the qualitative observations of our coders, but also by the fact that mixed tweets were twice as likely to be broadcast/singleton tweets (32.7%) than those that were purely personal (16.8%). British candidates were markedly more strategic when sharing personal information; mixed tweets accounted for 35.5% of their personal tweets compared to 8.1% in the Dutch case.

When it comes to mixed tweets we are able to examine which *function* they serve, a variable which comes from our broader study of political tweeting. Studies have found that one of the most common tweeting behaviours among politicians during an election campaign has been updates from the campaign trail and

**Table 8.5** Mixing of the political with the personal—tweet function (%)

	British ( <i>N</i> = 279)	Dutch ( <i>N</i> = 100)	Total ( <i>N</i> = 379)
Campaign trail	41.6	51.0	44.1
Acknowledgements	21.5	4.0	16.9
Campaign promotion	9.7	19.0	12.1
Critique	10.4	7.0	9.5
News/report	6.5	6.0	6.3
Own/party stance	5.0	8.0	5.8
Advice/helping	1.4	5.0	2.4
Campaign action	2.2	0.0	1.6
Requesting public input	1.8	0.0	1.3

campaign promotion (Graham et al. 2013b, 2016). This includes tweets where candidates post updates such as status/location updates and reports on campaign events, or when a candidate promotes himself/herself, a fellow politician, the party or other organization (Graham et al. 2013b). As Table 8.5 shows, mixing the personal with updates from the campaign trail and campaign promotion accounted for more than half (56.2%) of all mixed tweets, as the examples below illustrate:

Mum & Dad are visiting me on the campaign trail tomorrow. Must remember to tidy the house at some point! *Daisy Benson (Liberal Democrats)*

My beautiful nearly-two year old has woken up at hourly intervals in the night. Not the best run in to polling day. *Tom Watson (Labour)*

Great morning canvassing with the team!! Nigel just sorted our hair out after we got caught in the rain!!! *Karen Chilvers (Liberal Democrats)*

Drinking coffee with my dad, grandma and aunt. They all support the CDA. Why? Because the Netherlands is better off with CDA, now and in the future. *Yang Soo Kloosterhof (CDA)*

Though these types of tweets seemed more strategic, they did offer a personal touch. Often this was done via the use of children and family (especially among British candidates); 21.1% of mixed tweets were about family life.

Mixed tweets were also used in strategic ways to critique opposing parties and politicians as the example below demonstrates (see also Erwin Hoogland's tweet above about Wilders):

My 8 year old twinnies; "When did the Liberals last win an election?". Me—"nearly 100 years ago." Them; "So, basically, they're rubbish". *Eric Joyce (Labour)*

Another strategy was to use mixed tweets to draw attention to particular political issues:

My aunty telling me how she couldn't work without child tax credits towards her twins *Maryam Kayani (Labour)*

Here Labour candidate Maryam Khan uses a life experience from one of her relatives to illustrate the problem of being dependent on child tax credit.

**Table 8.6** Personalized tweeting practices in percentages ( $N = 2025$ )

	Impression management		Immediate and spontaneous	
	Personal soundbite tweets	Strategic mixed tweets	Off-the-cuff tweets	Chitchat tweets
British	14.9	35.5	7.1	42.5
Dutch	17.8	8.1	9.6	64.6
Total	16.6	18.7	8.6	56.0

## Personalized Tweeting Practices: A Typology

For our 20 candidates, sharing aspects about their personal lives was quite common via Twitter on the campaign trail. Our analysis revealed that there was a mix of tweeting behaviours when it came to politicians' personal tweeting practices. Based upon the above empirical findings, and supplemented by qualitative insights from the coding process, we present and discuss below our typology of candidates' personalized tweeting behaviour (see Table 8.6).

One group of behaviours seemed to be directly related to impression management, referring to the various communication strategies politicians use to control the impressions they give voters (traditionally via the media) in order to win elections or public support. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the personalization focus of both the media and the electorate that has strengthened in recent decades means that effective strategies of this kind have increasingly focused on creating a more *personal* connection with voters. And indeed earlier research into online communications has suggested that politicians are adopting more personalized strategies such as sharing/disclosing information about one's home and family life, and personal interests in TV, films, music, etc. via websites (Stanyer 2008; Vergeer and Hermans 2012), blogs (Auty 2005; Coleman and Moss 2008; Jackson 2008) and more recently social media (Jackson and Lilleker 2011).

As we might expect, our study too revealed that such impression management strategies were quite common among our 20 politicians, accounting for 35.4% of their personal tweets (50.4% for British and 25.8% for Dutch candidates). As Table 8.6 reveals, we identified two particular personalized tweeting practices in this regard: *personal soundbite tweets* and *strategic mixed tweets*. Personal soundbite tweets came in two basic forms; in both cases, a specific political context was lacking. First, candidates seemed to use Twitter to broadcast personal updates on what they had done or what they were going to do. These personal soundbites were often family-related updates (e.g. tweeting about spending time with the family) as this example from Yang Soo Kloosterhof (CDA) illustrates: 'Back home. Visited my parents because my grandma and aunt are visiting from Canada. Grandma will turn 85 here'. The other common form here was tweeting about personal likes and dislikes like this tweet by Mei Li Vos (PvdA): 'When it comes to tea, Earl Grey with mint leaves is my favourite'.

In both cases, such practices provide a glimpse into the private lives of politicians and served to construct a sense of sincerity and closeness, attempting to develop a more personal relationship with (distant) voters. These tweets are posted by the politicians themselves, strengthening this sense. That said, often this type of tweeting behaviour seemed obviously strategic as though you could envision the politician thinking, ‘let’s tweet about my family or about my favourite TV series so I seem more personable’. This is partly due to the fact that these were typically one-off, broadcast-type tweets and tended to resemble common *political* tweeting behaviours such as updates from the campaign trail. Occasionally, there were instances when personal soundbite tweets sparked a more interactive, engaging affair. A tweet by Louise Mensch (Conservatives), which stated, ‘Running. It’s amazing. Try it.’, triggered a series of interaction with followers on Mensch’s running habits and tips. In this social context, Mensch seemed to temporally transform from being a politician on the campaign trail to being an ordinary person discussing personal experiences with fellow runners.

Strategic mixed tweets represent another tweeting practice under impression management, which was particularly prominent among British candidates. Such tweeting behaviour was clearly strategic, representing politicians’ attempt to add a personal touch to the campaign trail. As some of the examples above show, some politicians were quite creative when mixing the personal with the political. This is particularly true when it came to revealing aspects of their family lives. Tom Watson was a good example here. He mixed his life experiences as a father with a number of political functions, such as campaign updates and promotion, which seemed to tap into experiences that most parents share: ‘Two year old woke at five. Now she’s asleep. Her candidate dad is not. Don’t forget to vote Labour today’. Such tweets potentially invoke an intimate connection to others who recognize these personal situations. Candidates too used personal experiences to voice their position on a particular issue. Such personalized practices, we argue, potentially convey the feeling that they are ‘in touch’ with and have first-hand knowledge of ordinary people’s problems and convey the impression that political ideas are shaped by not only party ideology, but also personal experiences and encounters with ‘ordinary people’ (see also Coleman and Moss 2008).

Our second group of behaviours tended to be more natural and organic, embracing a more immediate and spontaneous personalized form of communication. As Table 8.6 reveals, such practices accounted for 64.6% of personal tweets (49.6% for British and 74.2% for Dutch candidates). Two personalized tweeting practices were identified: *off-the-cuff tweets* and *chitchat tweets*. Off-the-cuff tweets refer to live/spontaneous commenting, typically on televised event (e.g. Petra Borst’s Eurovision Song Contest tweet above) and series (e.g. commenting on Doctor Who was quite popular), and when listening to music. Such tweeting practices create a live, immediate connection with followers, a sense that they are there with the politician watching, e.g. a live performance on TV.

Lastly, Twitter was also used by candidates as a platform for small talk (aka chitchat tweets). Indeed, small talk represented more than half (56%) of personal tweets. Candidates here were embracing the interactive and spontaneous nature of

Twitter by engaging in chitchat with followers. Moreover, they were chitchatting primarily with ‘ordinary citizens’, which accounted for 66.7% of interactive (@replies), chitchat tweets. Such personalized behaviour is a break from the more strategic personalized practices discussed above and which we typically see via other social media platforms such as Facebook or via the traditional media, where it is more about establishing hinterland and communicating a broader public profile beyond a political one. Here, however, it seemed more mundane, informal and, we argue, authentic. That is, such conversations appeared natural and unrehearsed, and ultimately conveyed the feeling that the reader was observing (or actually engaging with) the real, authentic person behind the politician. Banter too was quite common here as the tweets from an exchange with Eric Joyce (Labour) illustrate:

@ericjoyce you are my food, you are my breath, you are my everything.

@ANONYMOUS Well that’s made my day, I’m telling you. Someone cares! Just need a wedding venue now. The Cladhan in Falkirk is competitive.<sup>1</sup>

Engaging in such personalized tweeting behaviour conveyed a sense of liveliness and seemed to create an informal, comfortable atmosphere for followers. On face value, such tweets might seem trivial, lacking any meaningful information. This may be true, but they do serve another purpose. As Marwick and Boyd (2011) point out, such behaviour serves ‘a social function, reinforcing connections and maintaining social bonds’. Given that politicians today suffer from a failure to inspire sincerity and trustworthiness, such behaviour via Twitter might help reduce this disconnect.

## Conclusion

We are living in an era of not only extensive, but intense, distrust in politicians and cynicism in politics more broadly (see, e.g., the recent report by the Hansard Society 2016). More specifically, over the past few decades there has been a growing feeling of disconnect between politicians, parties and political institutions and those they claim to represent. As Coleman and Blumler (2009) argue, ‘There is a pervasive sense that politicians and the people they represent inhabit different worlds, speak mutually incomprehensible languages and fail to respect one another’. The new communicative spaces that have opened up between politicians and citizens in the age of social media, however, seem to offer a new way forward for politicians to adopt communicative strategies that might help reduce this disconnection.

Our case shows how personalized tweeting behaviour on Twitter can potentially strengthen the relation with voters by creating a sense of closeness and intimate

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<sup>1</sup>We anonymized this tweet to protect the identity of the Twitter user.

attachment with followers. More specifically, based on our content analysis, our typology identified signifiers of authenticity such as interactivity and privatization with a topical focus on friends and chatter, children and family life, and the sharing of personal preferences and experiences more broadly. One of our key findings for example was the use of Twitter by candidates as a platform for small talk with the public, an interactive, informal and intimate form of communication that differs from the more strategic personalized practices of establishing hinterland, which we are used to seeing via the traditional media. This authentic and intimate communication practice on Twitter might be one of the strategies used by politicians to help balance the increasingly stage-managed nature of much political campaigning.

Given the size of our sample of candidates, we should hesitate to make generalizations beyond what we might consider the most prolific personal tweeters. But given the range of personalised tweeting behaviours we found amongst them—captured in the emergent typology—we can consider how these behaviours might play out amongst a larger cohort of electoral candidates, especially that including a long tail of infrequent and/or reluctant tweeters. Our typology, then, can be seen as an agenda for future research to test and develop in different electoral arenas. Here, research might examine the dynamics of gender, age, incumbency, ideology and electoral prospects on personalized tweeting behaviours, questions that were beyond our small sample of candidates but which could develop more layers into our typology. Our analysis revealed differences between British and Dutch politicians, which we have not explored in any great depth here. Again, this points towards country dynamics that are worth future exploration.

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# Chapter 9

## Social Media Sourcing Practices: How Dutch Newspapers Use Tweets in Political News Coverage

Bert Jan Brands, Todd Graham, and Marcel Broersma

### Introduction

In 2012, Twitter announced that it had 140 million active users who sent roughly 340 million tweets daily.<sup>1</sup> At the time, it was one of the most popular social media platforms. This was particularly true in the Netherlands; the adoption rate grew from 16% in 2010 to 27% by the end of 2011, making it one of the most active nations on Twitter (comScore 2011). Politicians and journalists too have increasingly incorporated Twitter into their daily work routines and practices. In the Netherlands, 93% of MPs are using Twitter on a regular basis with 86% indicating that Twitter was their most important social media platform (Weber Shandwick 2014). Journalists have also increasingly integrated Twitter into their daily work (see, e.g., Hedman 2014; Parmelee 2014). In 2013, the Netherlands was among the highest ranked nations (88%) with regard to the daily use of Twitter for news reporting (Pole and Gulyás 2013). Journalists, who hesitated at first, eventually found themselves using Twitter as one Dutch political journalist stated: ‘I resisted it for a long time until I noticed it had become inevitable. I did not want to follow the 2012 elections without Twitter, risking that colleagues anticipate things they

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<sup>1</sup>See <http://mashable.com/2009/11/19/twitter-whats-happening/#WvC9OFcgHaql>

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already know, while I don't because I'm too stubborn to be on Twitter' (Brands 2014: 76).

What has this meant for journalism practice? Research has shown that journalists have incorporated Twitter into their news reporting to generate story ideas; find and develop sources; and report, share, and break news (Artwick 2013; Brands 2014; Parmelee 2014; Lasorsa et al. 2012; Zeller and Hermida 2015). One of Twitter's more popular functions is that of an awareness system that facilitates 'ambient journalism' in which journalists monitor public opinion, key sources, and unfolding of news events (Hermida 2010). For political journalists, this not only offers a convenient and quick way to get a sense of what is going on in parliament, but it also allows them to gauge what is on the minds of political pundits and the public more broadly, as one Dutch political journalist revealed, 'It's like measuring the temperature of the water. You get an idea of what the usual suspects think, so you have an impression of people's opinions out there' (Brands 2014: 77).

Twitter too helps journalists gather information and quotes from (elusive) sources and gain easy access to alternative, non-elite sources. This has raised questions over the impact of Twitter (and social media more broadly) on journalist-source relations. Much of the debate in political communication here is centred on the degree to which sources via social media influence agenda-building in mainstream media—the process by which news organisations and journalists determine what to cover or ignore (Nisbet 2008). Some scholars have argued that with social media the balance of power has shifted in favour of sources, especially those from the political elite such as politicians (Broersma and Graham 2016). For them, Twitter represents another channel for political elites to influence news coverage, as it allows sources to control the message and talk to the public directly (think of President Donald Trump's use of Twitter), empowering their agenda-building competence. Though Twitter has become a tool for both journalists and their sources, the extent to which they influence the agenda-building process in mainstream media is less evident and seems to vary depending on the (national) context (Brands 2014; Broersma and Graham 2012; Burgess and Bruns 2012; Hermida 2013; Parmelee 2014). Questions over the power balance between journalists and their sources in the news making process still remain.

Other scholars have suggested that the transfer of social media contents to mainstream media allows for a larger diversity of sources because social media make it easier for journalists to contact members of the public and tap into alternative views on an issue (Heinrich 2011; Hermida 2013; Paulussen and Harder 2014). This, in turn, might expand news access to a wider range of sources such as NGOs and ordinary citizens. However, there has been relatively few empirical studies that have investigated whether social media is introducing more balanced news access for a wider range of sources in political news coverage (see, e.g., Broersma and Graham 2012; Wallsten 2015).

This chapter attempts to fill in these gaps by investigating how journalists are using Twitter as a source for reporting by tracking and analysing newspaper citations of tweets in Dutch political news coverage. We are interested in how, and to what extent, Twitter is contributing to the agenda-building process. Our

research, which included a (manual) content analysis, focused on four main analytical areas: we asked (a) which actors' tweets were cited; (b) what function did such tweets serve; (c) what kinds of tweets were cited (i.e. the character of tweets); (d) and finally what were the dominant quoting practices. This study contributes to our understanding of the ways in which social media is shaping sourcing practices in political news coverage.

## Sources, Journalists, and (Political) News Coverage

As Franklin et al. (2010) have argued, at the heart of journalism practice is the relationship between journalists and their sources. Sources are considered one of the key elements in constructing the news (Gans 1979; Manning 2001; Sigal 1973). They supply journalists with the 'raw materials' to build news stories such as speeches, interviews, government hearings, and corporate reports (Shoemaker and Reese 1996). Journalists also depend on sources for story leads/tips and information verification. Thus, developing trusted relations with sources is considered by most journalists to be a crucial aspect of journalism practice. However, developing a cosy relationship with sources (especially in the realm of politics) has raised questions over the power relations between journalists and their sources. Gans (1979), for example, described the relationship as a dance where the two compete for control, arguing that sources usually take the lead. Research has shown that (to varying degrees) sources can have a strong influence on shaping the content of news reporting (Berkowitz and Beach 1993; Reese et al. 1994; Shoemaker and Reese 1996; Sigal 1986); thus they can be seen as an important factor in the agenda-building process.

Within the field of political communication, agenda-building research has investigated how certain groups of sources influence what political issues journalists cover (see, e.g., Kioussis and Strömbäck 2010; Lariscy et al. 2009; Weaver et al. 2004). In politics, there is a multitude of different actors who attempt to influence media coverage such as politicians, political institutions, civil society organisations, think tanks, corporations, and ordinary citizens. However, research on sourcing patterns shows that political journalists tend to rely heavily on a narrow range of official, government sources (Alexseev and Bennett 1995; Hallin et al. 1993; Brown et al. 1987; Berkowitz 1987; Sigal 1973; Whitney et al. 1989), raising questions about the diversity of sources in political news coverage. Concerns here are linked to the criticism that news media legitimise (thus maintaining) the current social, economic, and political power structures of society (Gans 1979; Manning 2001; Schudson 2003; Reich 2011).

In recent years, however, economic concerns, new technology, and organisational changes have been key factors affecting the news industry (especially the newspaper industry), which potentially have profound consequences for source diversity. More specifically, the speeding up of the news cycle and the shortening of the publication process, along with fewer resources for news

reporting, have resulted in journalists writing more stories in less time with fewer resources. As a result, we have seen a rise in ‘cut-and-paste’ journalism: a form of journalism that relies heavily on information from third parties in place of active news gathering outside the newsroom (Broersma 2010; Davies 2008; Lewis et al. 2008; O’Neill and O’Connor 2008; Phillips 2010), which increases the tendency of journalists to rely on elite sources. For political journalists, this has meant an increase in reliance on ‘information subsidies’—information provided to journalists by sources as a means of gaining influence over the news media agenda (e.g. press releases, press conferences, digital handouts)—from the political elite (i.e. well-known and readily accessible sources). Indeed, research has shown that information subsidies can successfully shape political news coverage (Kioussis et al. 2011; Kioussis and Strömbäck 2010; Marland 2012; Roberts and McCombs 1994).

In the digital age, the relationship between journalists and their sources is changing due to the rise and use of social media, which is having an impact on daily work routines and practices of both journalists and their sources. Some scholars assume that this would open up sourcing practices to non-elite sources such as ordinary citizens (see, e.g., Hermida 2013). One of the advantages of social media is that it makes it easier for journalists to follow events, contact members of the public, and tap into alternative views on an issue. Such platforms have greatly expanded the number and diversity of voices available to journalists. As Broersma and Graham (2012: 404) suggest, ‘Journalists can use this “wisdom of the crowd” to gather information quickly under a broad and diverse range of sources they would normally not have found or contacted’. In the end, the hope is that this might help reduce the power of elite sources over the agenda-building process in political news coverage.

## The Use of Twitter as a News Source

Over the past decade, we have seen an increase in research on the role of Twitter in political communication (for an overview see Jungherr 2016). There are a growing number of studies on the ways in which politicians and citizens are adopting Twitter to broadcast political messages and engage in public debate, especially during election campaigns (e.g. Graham et al. 2013, 2016; Kruikemeier 2014; Larsson and Ihlen 2015). There is an emerging body of research on the impact of Twitter on journalism practice (e.g. Hermida 2010; Lasorsa et al. 2012). Much of the research here has focused on the role of Twitter during elections (e.g. Burgess and Bruns 2012; Skogerbø et al. 2016; Verweij 2012), for breaking news coverage (e.g. Allan 2012), and during times of crises and conflict such as natural disasters (e.g. Bruno 2011; Cooper 2011; Palser 2009) and uprisings, protests, and civil disobedience (e.g. Armstrong and Gao 2010; Hermida et al. 2014; Knight 2012; Vis 2013). However, there has been far less attention paid to journalists’ everyday use of Twitter during normal news cycles, and far less when it comes to sourcing practices in political news coverage (for an overview see Lecheler and Kruikemeier 2015).

The research that is available suggests that for political journalists Twitter has become an important everyday tool for news reporting. For example, Parmelee's (2014: 442) seminal study of American political journalists' use of Twitter, which was based on semi-structured interviews with journalists, revealed that Twitter has become an essential part of news reporting as one of the journalists stated: 'Twitter has become such an integral part of my reporting that I don't really think of it as a separate thing anymore'. In countries like the United States and the Netherlands where Twitter is popular among politicians and political pundits, it is only natural that Twitter has become an important news-gathering tool, as one Dutch political reporter pointed out: 'It is our job to closely follow politicians. Part of their public lives takes place on Twitter, so a parliamentary journalist who takes himself seriously can't do without it anymore' (Brands 2014: 75–76).

Given its popularity and frequency of use, just how is Twitter impacting journalism practice? Parmelee's study found that tweets (from political leaders) were being used as 'generators of story ideas; tip sheets for events that they might have otherwise missed; places to go to find quotes and polling data; ways to expand access to a wide range of sources to get alternative viewpoints; forms of background information that help them better understand issues; ways to double-check information in existing stories' (2014: 441; see also Brands 2014; Metag and Rauchfleisch 2016). However, when it comes to using tweets as news sources and the impact of Twitter on journalist-source relations, research based on questionnaires and interviews with political reporters has focused primarily on the use of elite sources such as politicians. Such studies tell us little about whether Twitter is opening up sourcing practices to non-elite sources such as ordinary citizens, and whether it is encouraging the use of a diversity of sources as some scholars have suggested it would.

There have been several studies that examined the content of news, tracking the types of tweets cited. However, the empirical evidence available provides a somewhat conflicting account. Some studies suggest that social media represent yet another source dominated by political elites, thus reinforcing their power. For example, by tracking and analysing the mention of tweets, studies show that journalists tend to rely heavily on politicians and government officials as sources in election news reporting (Broersma and Graham 2012; Skogerbø et al. 2016; Wallsten 2015) or (political) news coverage more broadly (Moon and Hadley 2014). Other studies have shown that citing tweets has led to a more diversity of sources (including the use of ordinary citizens and other non-elite sources). For example, Broersma and Graham's (2013: 461) longitudinal analysis (2006–2011) of Dutch and British national dailies found that almost a quarter of all tweets cited were 'vox populi or people involved' (see also Paulussen and Harder 2014). Given the relatively few empirical studies available, it is difficult to draw conclusions. Moreover, there have been (to our knowledge) no studies that have focused specifically on political news coverage during the normal news cycle (i.e. outside of election campaigns). Thus, questions over Twitter's role as a news source in political news reporting still remain.

The aim of this study is to help fill this gap by investigating how Twitter contributes to media agenda-building by analysing the use of tweets as sources in political news coverage during the 2012 political news cycle in four Dutch national newspapers. What makes 2012 unique is that it also included a general election campaign, allowing us to make comparisons (when applicable) between the normal and election news cycles. This study addresses some of the unanswered questions by asking:

RQ1: How frequently do journalists use Twitter as a source for political news reporting?

RQ2: Whose tweets do journalists cite in political news coverage?

RQ3: What function do cited tweets serve in political news reporting?

RQ4: What types of tweets are cited by journalists in political news coverage?

RQ5: What are the dominant quoting practices used by journalists when citing tweets in political news reporting?

## Research Design and Methodology

Building on the work of Broersma and Graham (2012, 2013), our study was designed to investigate the agenda-building processes in four Dutch national newspapers. We selected the newspapers *Algemeen Dagblad* (popular), *De Telegraaf* (popular), *De Volkskrant* (quality), and *NRC Handelsblad* (quality). These dailies were selected because they have the highest circulation of the paid newspapers in the Netherlands; are spread fairly evenly across the political spectrum; and allow us to explore the differences/similarities between quality and popular newspapers.<sup>2</sup>

The sample of news articles was based on political news coverage during 2012. This year also included a general election, which took place on September 12<sup>th</sup>. Our aim was to move beyond election campaigns—exceptional periods of news reporting when compared to non-election periods (Van Aelst and De Swert 2009: 163)—by including political news coverage from the normal news cycle. Thus, in addition to the 4 weeks of the campaign, articles were gathered from the months of January, April, July, and October in order to provide a representative overview of political news coverage throughout the year. We used the electronic database *LexisNexis* to collect articles that included references to Twitter as a source by using the Boolean search query *twit!* or *tweet!*. All articles were manually checked to see if one or more tweets were directly cited (as opposed to more general discussions on the role of Twitter) and if the topic of the article was politics. This resulted in 195 articles containing 298 cited tweets.

Articles and their tweets were then manually coded for content. The coding manual builds on Broersma and Graham's (2012, 2013) coding scheme. Prior to the

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<sup>2</sup>All circulation numbers can be found at <http://www.nommedia.nl/>, Nationaal Onderzoek Multimedia.



analysis, a pilot study was carried out to improve its reliability and effectiveness. The focus here was on six distinct aspects of the use of tweets as sources. First, we coded for the type of actor whose tweet was cited, which included politicians, lobbyists, professionals, experts, media, celebrities, cultural producers, ordinary users (vox pop), witnesses (involved), and other individuals. Second, we coded for the function the tweet served in the news article: did the tweet trigger the writing of the news piece; was it used as an illustration in the news article; was it part of a question and answer exchange; or was it simply a stand-alone (e.g. tweets of the day). Third, we coded the character/nature of the tweet, i.e. was it providing facts (factual), opinion, critique, acknowledging others such as thanking or congratulating (acknowledgements), giving advice, mobilising others (a call-to-action), or other content. Fourth, our coding scheme also included two codes which captured the use of humour and personal topics (i.e. personal information, interests, or experiences) in tweets. Finally, we coded for whether the tweet was used verbatim, as a partial quote, or paraphrased by the journalist.

To improve the coding manual and increase confidence in our findings, inter-coder reliability was conducted on a random sample of articles ( $N = 30$ ) by two coders. Calculated using Cohen's Kappa, coefficients met appropriate acceptance levels (Viera and Garrett 2005): actor type (.92), tweet function (.87), tweet character (.76), personal (.65), humour (.90), and quoting practices (.95).

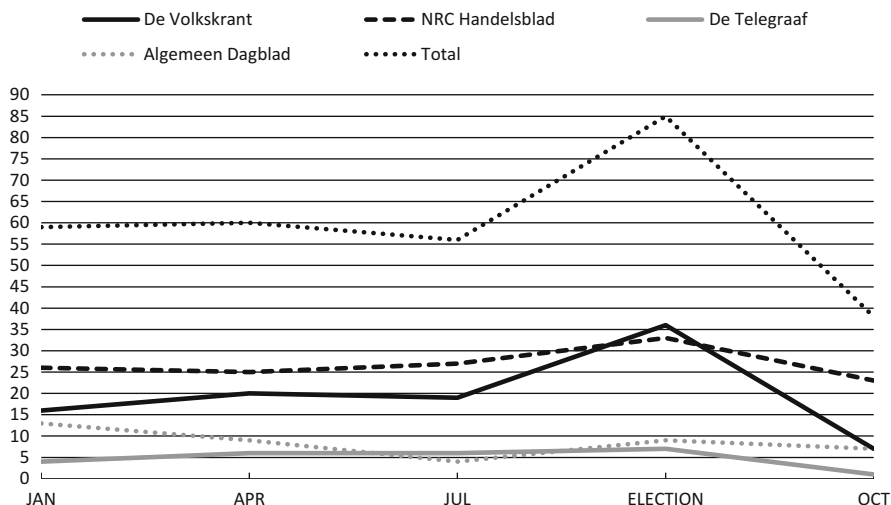
## Findings

### *How Frequently Is Twitter Used as a News Source?*

The results of our analysis indicate that the use of tweets as news sources varies widely between popular and quality newspapers. It seems that the potential for social media content to set the media agenda is more likely among quality newspapers than popular ones. As Table 9.1 reveals, both the *NRC Handelsblad* and *De Volkskrant* accounted for 78% of the tweets sourced. One possible explanation here might be that the popular press publishes less political news, which would mean

**Table 9.1** Articles citing tweets as sources per newspaper

	Articles		Tweets	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
De Volkskrant	58	29.7	98	32.9
NRC Handelsblad	84	43.1	134	45.0
<i>Quality</i>	142	72.8	232	77.9
De Telegraaf	23	11.8	24	8.1
Algemeen Dagblad	30	15.4	42	14.1
<i>Popular</i>	53	27.2	66	22.1
Total	195	100.0	298	100.0



**Fig. 9.1** The frequency of tweets used as news sources in political news coverage (2012)

fewer opportunities for journalists at these organisations to cite tweets. Though calculating the total number of political news articles was beyond the scope of this study, research does suggest that the Dutch popular press dedicates less space to politics than their quality counterparts (Scholten and Ruigrok 2006).

As noted earlier, the dataset consisted of two specific time frames: regular months (January, April, July, and October) and the 4-week general election campaign, which took place between 15 August and September 13, 2012. As Fig. 9.1 shows, there was a sharp increase in the number of tweets cited during the election campaign. Indeed, for three of the four newspapers, this was the most active period while the use of tweets as sources during the regular news cycle was relatively stable across all four newspapers, with a dip in the month following the election. Not only is their more space dedicated to covering politics during an election campaign by the press, research has also shown that the political Twittersphere is more active during elections; for example, politicians/parties are more active (posting tweets) on Twitter during an election campaign than non-election periods (see, e.g., Larsson and Svensson 2014). Together, this seems to account for the spike in the citing of tweets.

### *Whose Tweets Are Cited?*

As Table 9.2 indicates, politicians were the top group of actors cited by journalists from both the popular and quality newspapers, accounting for 72% of all the tweets in our sample, which is in line with previous research (Broersma and Graham 2012; Moon and Hadley 2014; Skogerbø et al. 2016; Wallsten 2014, 2015). Given that

**Table 9.2** Type of actors whose tweets were cited

		De Volkskrant	NRC	<i>Quality</i>	De Telegraaf	AD	<i>Popular</i>	Total
Politician	Count	64	102	169	19	28	47	213
	%	65.3	76.1	72.8	79.2	66.7	71.2	71.5
Vox Pop	Count	25	11	36	1	10	11	47
	%	25.5	8.2	15.5	4.2	23.8	16.7	15.8
Media	Count	6	14	20	2	1	3	23
	%	6.1	10.4	8.6	8.3	2.4	4.5	7.7
Celebrity	Count	2	4	6	0	1	1	7
	%	2.0	3.0	2.6	0.0	2.4	1.5	2.3
Lobbyist	Count	1	2	3	1	2	3	6
	%	1.0	1.5	1.3	4.2	4.8	4.5	2.0
Other	Count	0	1	1	1	0	1	2
	%	0.0	0.7	0.4	4.2	0.0	1.5	0.7
Total	Count	98	134	232	24	42	66	298

Note: There were no tweets coded as *professionals* or *witnesses*. *Cultural producers* and *experts* are collapsed under the *other* code due to their infrequent use

**Table 9.3** Tweets cited by political party

	# of politicians	%	# of tweets	%
GroenLinks (GL)	15	19.2	48	22.5
Christen-Democratisch Appèl (CDA)	15	19.2	24	11.3
Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie (VVD)	12	15.3	17	8.0
Partij voor Vrijheid en Vooruitgang (PVV)	11	14.1	78	36.6
Partij van de Arbeid (PvdA)	9	11.5	14	6.6
Democraten 66 (D66)	6	7.7	15	7.0
Socialistische Partij (SP)	3	3.8	3	1.4
Partij voor de Dieren (PvdD)	2	2.6	4	1.9
ChristenUnie (CU)	1	1.3	3	1.4
Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij (SGP)	1	1.3	4	1.9
Other parties	3	3.8	3	1.4
Total	78		213	

Note: VVD stands for the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy, a conservative-liberal party; GL stands for the Green Party; PvdA stands for the Labour Party; CDA stands for Christian Democratic Appeal party, a Christian-democratic party; PVV stands for the Party of Freedom, a right-wing populist party; D66 stands for Democrats 66, a social-liberal and progressive party; SP stands for the Socialist Party; PvdD stands for the Party for the Animals; CU stands for the Christian Union, a social-Christian party; and SGP stands for the Reformed Political Party, a Christian right party

politicians were often the main actors in the stories—e.g. their perspectives on an issue—it seems reasonable that journalists turned to their tweets as sources. This included 75 individual politicians, along with three party accounts (SP, VVD, and D66). As Table 9.3 shows, the politicians cited came from a range of political parties across the political spectrum. That said, the PVV (the far right populist

party) and Green Party represented more than half (59%) of the tweets used in political news coverage. This is partly due to the PVV party leader’s (Geert Wilders) use of Twitter and relation to the news media (which will be discussed further below), and the increased news coverage of the Greens due to party leader Jolande Sap being forced to resign from her leadership position after poor election results.

In both the popular and quality press, the public’s (ordinary users) tweets were the second largest group of actors cited by journalists, accounting for 16% of the sourced tweets. One remarkable finding was the difference between the election campaign and the normal news cycle. Although politicians accounted for roughly 80% of the tweets cited during the non-election periods, during the campaign they only represented 49% of the tweets cited. As Fig. 9.2 reveals, we saw a sharp increase in the use of ordinary users’ tweets during the campaign, representing 31% of cited tweets. It was the quality press (especially *De Volkskrant*) that was responsible for the increase; tweets from the public accounted for 36% as opposed to 6% for the popular press. Our findings show that the use of the vox pop (2 years on) by the quality press has increased when compared to news coverage of the 2010 general election; Broersma and Graham (2012) found that this group of actors in 2010 accounted for slightly more than 20% of the tweets cited by *De Volkskrant* and *NRC Handelsblad*.

Table 9.4 shows the top ten politicians cited by Dutch newspapers in 2012. As we might expect, five of the top ten were (former) party leaders. Given their position in the party, their tweets carry a higher degree of newsworthiness. This is particularly true for party leader Geert Wilders (PVV), whose tweets were cited 59 times, making him the most cited Dutch politician in our sample. Wilders’ use of

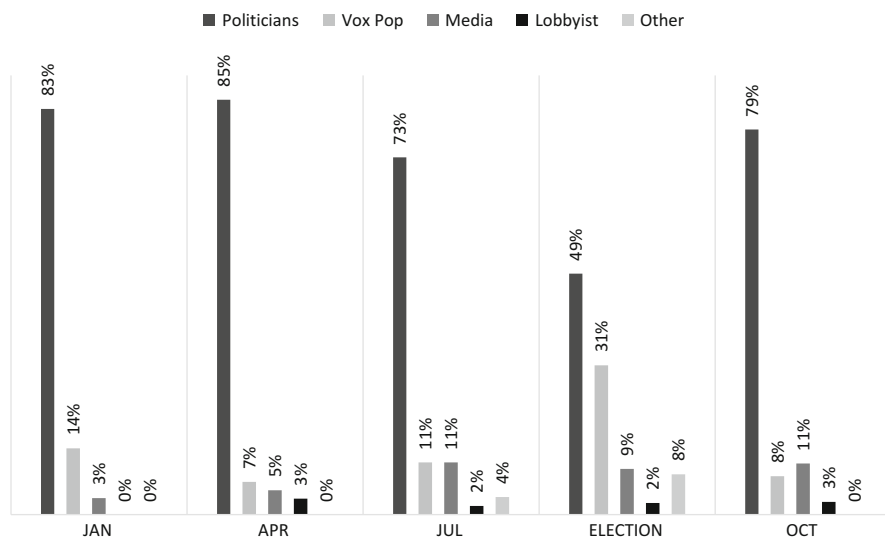


Fig. 9.2 Type of actors whose tweets were cited over the 5-month sample

**Table 9.4** Top ten most cited politicians (tweet count)

	De Volkskrant	NRC	Quality	De Telegraaf	AD	Popular	Total
Geert Wilders (PVV)	24	22	46	3	10	13	59
Ineke van Gent (GL)	3	5	8	1	2	3	11
Femke Halsema (GL)	1	5	6	0	3	3	9
Jolande Sap (GL)	4	3	7	0	0	0	7
Alexander Pechtold (D66)	1	4	5	1	0	1	6
Bruno Braakhuis (GL)	6	0	6	0	0	0	6
Thom de Graaf (D66)	1	3	4	0	0	0	4
Ronald Plasterk (PvdA)	1	3	4	0	0	0	4
Kees van der Staaij (SGP)	1	3	4	0	0	0	4
Jhim van Bommel (PVV)	0	3	3	1	0	1	4

Twitter represents a good example of how to use social media to set the news media agenda. His tweets are so tempting to use because he avoids talking to news reporters directly; thus journalists are dependent on PVV press releases and especially Wilders' Twitter account. Another reason why Wilders' tweets are so successful at making their way into the pages of newspapers is due to his provocative and sensational style of tweeting. His tweets are often newsworthy because they are aggressive and humorous and touch upon sensitive issues such as religion and immigration (see also Brands 2014). As we will discuss later, lesser known politicians' tweets were more likely to be cited if they tweeted something outrageous or out of the ordinary.

### ***What Function Do Cited Tweets Serve?***

Broersma and Graham (2012, 2013) identified four functions of tweets in news articles: tweets were used as a trigger for a news story, as an illustration of news events, as a stand-alone quote, or as a form of Q&A. As Table 9.5 indicates, tweets largely served as illustrations in news articles (80%), which is in line with previous studies (Broersma and Graham 2012, 2013; Hladík and Štětka 2017; Wallsten 2015). Tweets here were used primarily to add flavour to news articles—factual descriptions of news events—and background/news analysis-type pieces.

The popular press was more likely to write articles based on a tweet than quality newspapers were, which again is in line with previous studies (Broersma and Graham 2012, 2013); triggers accounted for 21% of popular newspapers' tweets compared to 7% for the quality press. In many instances, this was a result of 'shocking' tweets posted by (lesser known) politicians. Some examples included Green Party politician Karin Dekker from Groningen, who voiced her displeasure over the proposed burqa ban by asking all women to buy and wear a burqa (*Algemeen Dagblad*, January 31, 2012, *Wethouder wil boerka dragen*), or VVD

**Table 9.5** Function of tweets

		De Volkskrant	NRC	<i>Quality</i>	De Telegraaf	AD	<i>Popular</i>	Total
Illustration	Count	92	94	186	21	31	52	238
	%	93.9	70.1	80.2	87.5	73.8	78.8	79.9
Trigger	Count	6	10	16	3	11	14	30
	%	6.1	7.5	6.9	12.5	26.2	21.2	10.1
Stand-alone	Count	0	30	30	0	0	0	30
	%	0.0	22.4	12.9	0.0	0.0	0.0	10.1
Total	Count	98	134	232	24	42	66	298

Note that there were no tweets coded for as *Q&A*

politician Alexander Scheek from Spijkernisse, who threatened to poison his neighbours' cat on Twitter (*Algemeen Dagblad*, July 11, 2012, *Raadslid dreigt buurkat te vergiftigen*). Finally, tweets did not function as Q&A exchanges in any of the four newspapers, while stand-alone tweets only appeared in the *NRC Handelsblad*, which printed tweets of the day. It seems that such uses of tweets, at least in political news coverage, have started to fade in comparison to earlier practice (see Broersma and Graham 2013).

### ***What Types of Tweets Are Cited?***

The third aspect of the tweets examined was their nature, i.e. the character of the tweets. As Table 9.6 shows, political opinions and critique were the dominant types of tweets sourced, which is in line with previous research (Skogerbø et al. 2016; Wallsten 2015), representing 67% of cited tweets. The difference between these two was at times very subtle but lies in the fact that critique is immediately directed at a person, organisation, or entity. For example, in an article about plans for the healthcare system, an *NRC Handelsblad* journalist uses a partial quote from Socialist politician Renske Leijten: 'On Twitter, MP Renske Leijten labelled the minister's plans as "destructive"' (*Schippers: thuiszorg zoveel mogelijk zelf betalen*, August 23). Such tweets were used often as a means of illustration or to provide colour to an article dealing with a specific political issue.

When briefly examining the other types of tweets, we find that factual statements were the next most popular type of tweet sourced, accounting for 17% of cited tweets. This included such issues as the progress of budget negotiations; PVV members announcing on Twitter that they are leaving the party; and politicians tweeting about their whereabouts during the campaign. Finally, directives (calls-to-action), which were particularly more prominent at the *NRC Handelsblad* (13%), round off the top four at 8%. Karin Dekker's tweet (mentioned above) was a clear example of a tweet aimed at mobilising public support/protest (asking women to buy a burqa and wear it as a form of protest) cited by journalists.

**Table 9.6** Character of tweets

		De Volkskrant	NRC	<i>Quality</i>	De Telegraaf	AD	<i>Popular</i>	Total
Opinion	Count	36	48	84	14	12	26	110
	%	36.7	35.8	36.2	58.3	28.6	39.4	36.9
Critique	Count	37	37	74	5	12	17	91
	%	37.8	27.6	31.9	20.8	28.6	25.8	30.5
Factual	Count	16	21	37	3	10	13	50
	%	16.3	15.7	15.9	12.5	23.8	19.7	16.8
Call-to-action	Count	3	17	20	0	4	4	24
	%	3.1	12.7	8.6	0.0	9.4	6.1	8.1
Acknowledgement	Count	4	6	10	0	3	3	13
	%	4.1	4.5	4.3	0.0	7.1	4.5	4.4
Other	Count	2	5	7	2	1	3	10
	%	2.0	3.7	3.0	8.3	2.4	4.5	3.4
Total	Count	98	134	232	24	42	66	298

Note that due to infrequent use the *advice-giving* code has been collapsed under the *other* code

### *The Use of Personal and Humorous Tweets*

Next, we examined whether journalists were citing tweets that were personal or humorous in nature. Over the past several decades, we have seen a shift in emphasis from political parties and ideologies to individual politicians and their personal qualities (Van Aelst et al. 2017). As Stanyer (2012) shows, in the Western media, we have seen an increase in ‘exposure of information and imagery about the politician as a person; the public scrutiny of personal relationships and family life; and the opening up of personal living spaces or spaces a politician might reasonably expect to be private from the public gaze’. Politicians too have been increasingly adopting a more personal touch, especially when using social media. Such practices have become an important factor in creating an identity for many politicians. As Corner (2003: 76) points out, ‘The private sphere of politicians is now more than ever being used as a resource in the manufacture of political identity [...]’. Twitter is a good medium for such forms of personalization because it allows the sharing of small updates about one’s private life, and this is controlled by the politicians themselves (see Graham’s et al. chapter in this volume).

Although studies have found that (Dutch) politicians commonly tweet personal content, providing insight into their private lives (Graham et al. 2013, 2016; Kruijemeier 2014), it seems that these types of tweets did not make it to the pages of Dutch newspapers. As Fig. 9.3 indicates, personal tweets account for only 7% of the tweets cited, which is in line with Broersma and Graham’s (2012) analysis of news coverage of the 2010 Dutch election campaign. In an article about Dutch parliament leaving for recess, *NRC Handelsblad* cited, for example, an MP who tweeted about immediately leaving for vacation: ‘Some members of

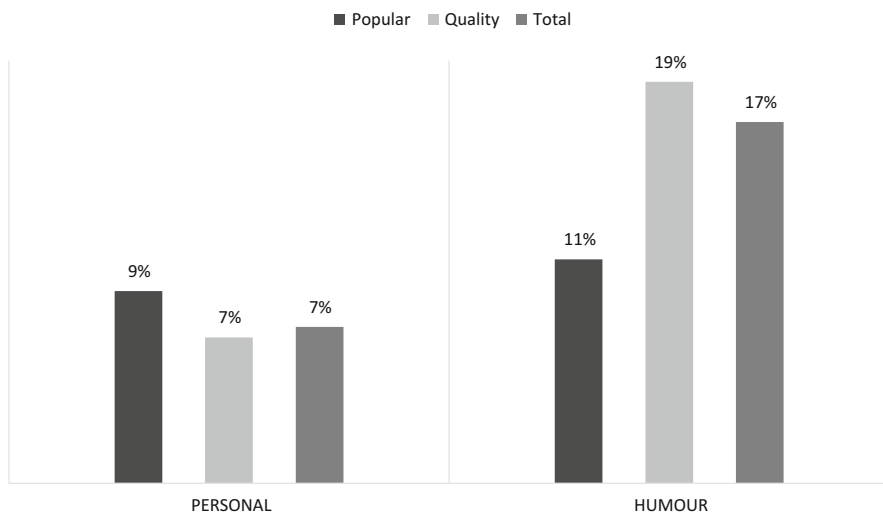


Fig. 9.3 Percentage of personal and humorous tweets cited

parliament couldn't wait after the last tough days filled with meetings. Green Party member Arjan El Fassed immediately jumped in his car on Friday afternoon. He tweeted: "Let's go! The kids are already singing" (*Over de Haag*, 7 July 2012). Another example included a tweet by Geert Wilders: 'Thank you very much for all the great birthday wishes via Twitter and e-mail for my birthday today', tweeted PVV leader Geert Wilders, who turned 49 today (*Kies Kort*, 6 September 2012, *NRC Handelsblad*).

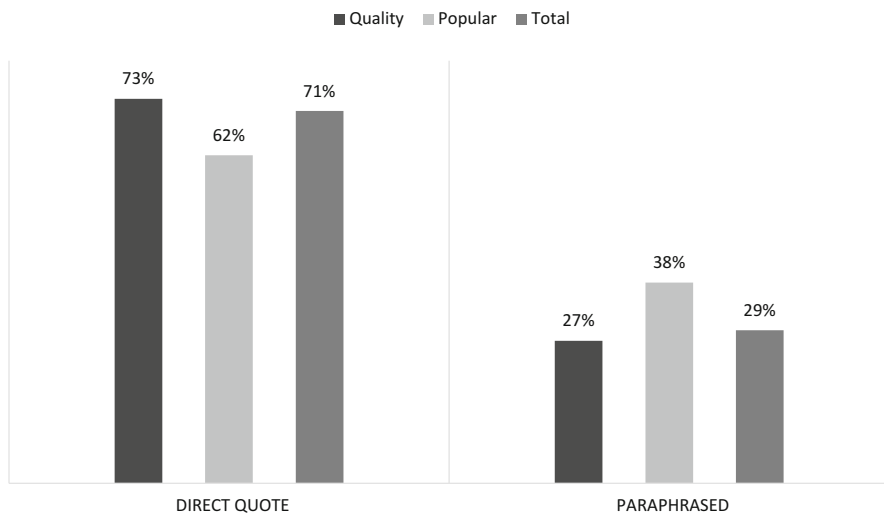
While personal tweets were few and far between, humorous tweets were a more popular source for journalists. Humour can also be considered part of the mediated persona, helping a politician look likeable (Corner 2003). The tweets cited here were often in the form of political humour: the use of humour as an expression of a political argument and/or criticism, which is a powerful communicative tool in politics (Ducharme 1994). Many of the tweets by Wilders cited by Dutch journalists contained some form of humour, such as in a complaint about the European Union receiving the Nobel Prize: 'The European Union receives a Nobel prize while Brussels is throwing Europe off a cliff. What's next, Van Rompuy winning an Oscar? #Foolishness' (*Europese Unie krijgt Nobelprijs voor de Vrede*, 12 October 2012, *NRC Handelsblad*). Similarly, a sarcastic tweet by CDA MP Pieter Omtzigt was cited by an *NRC Handelsblad* journalist: 'This year, I hope the focus will be on the crisis in Europe and the future of the Netherlands, and not on the Queen's head scarf, the vacation retreat or the orca' (*Over de Haag*, 17 January 2012). As the examples indicate, it was humorous tweets from MPs that tended to be used in political news coverage; politicians accounted for 58% of the humorous tweets cited.



### *What Are the Dominant Quoting Practices?*

Finally, it is worth considering how the journalists quoted tweets. As Fig. 9.4 shows, overall, using direct quotes—i.e. quoting tweets verbatim and in full—from Twitter was the most common practice among Dutch political reporters, which is in line with previous research (Broersma and Graham 2012, 2013; Hladík and Štětka 2017); it represented 71% of cited tweets. Quoting tweets verbatim potentially empowers sources (especially politicians), giving them a considerable degree of control over the content of the news. As Broersma and Graham (2012: 413) point out, this is particularly significant if ‘[. . .] journalists rely on a statement from a [source] without contacting him or her, thereby abandoning their power to critically question the source and the possibility to check the information in the tweet’.

There were some (minor) differences between popular and quality newspapers when it came paraphrasing tweets in news reports. With only 140 characters available, the context of a tweet is not always ideal for a literal citation in the news article, forcing journalists to either completely paraphrase the content of a tweet or include some of the key phrases from a tweet (partial quote). For example, a journalist at the *NRC Handelsblad* wrote: ‘In between [campaign stops], Wilders tweets from his car with tinted windows about “fantastic reception” in Spijkernisse, and how “fantastic” it is to be campaigning’ (*Het gaat goed met de PVV-campagne. Punt*, 3 September 2012). Other journalists opted for paraphrasing entire tweets such as this example from a *De Volkskrant* journalist: ‘That was the reason for GroenLinks-leader Jolande Sap to tweet that the fine for students could be abolished without implications for the budget’ (*CPB: tekort komt in 2013 uit op ‘slechts’ 2,7*



**Fig. 9.4** Quoting practices: paraphrased versus direct quotes

*procent*, 23 August 2012). Paraphrasing, in general, was more common among journalists from the popular press, accounting for 38% of their tweets compared to 27% for journalists at quality newspapers.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Our findings clearly show that Twitter has become a regularly used source for political journalists in Dutch newspapers (particularly for the quality press and especially during election campaigns), thus contributing to the agenda-building process. One of the advantages of Twitter (and social media more broadly) is that it provides journalists easy access to alternative, non-elite sources. As discussed earlier, some scholars have maintained that this, in turn, could potentially open up political news to a more diverse range of sources. Our findings, however, suggest that rather than opening up political news to alternative sources, Twitter, as a news source, is merely reinforcing the power of political elites to set the agenda; politicians accounted for nearly three-quarters of the tweets cited. Their tweets, which consisted largely of political positions and critique, were typically quoted verbatim.

At first glance, this might seem that Twitter is tipping the balance of power in favour of sources in the journalist-source relation. If a politician wants to shape news coverage, all they need to do is post some tweets on Twitter, and before you know it, they appear in the pages of the *NRC Handelsblad*. However, this is far from the case. First, as our findings reveal, there were only a handful of politicians (typically party leaders) whose tweets were cited regularly; ten politicians accounted for 54% of the tweets cited. Unless you tweeted something outlandish (like poisoning your neighbour's cat), you were far less likely as a 'backbencher'—an MP lower on the party list—to find your tweets on the pages of Dutch newspapers. Second, tweets were primarily used by journalists as illustrations, as a means of adding flavour and context to news articles and background pieces; triggers represented only 10% of the tweets cited while illustrations accounted for 80%. Such tweets often seemed to have been cherry-picked by journalists to add a more personal touch to the story rather than shaping it.

However, in line with Broersma and Graham's (2013, 2016) argument, it is clear from our analysis that for a handful of politicians the entrance of Twitter has indeed shifted the balance of power in the sources' favour. For example, PVV party leader Geert Wilders' tweets were used effectively as information subsidies, allowing him and his party some degree of control over their image and messaging in news coverage. His tweets were frequently found on the pages of Dutch newspapers. Sometimes they were setting the agenda (triggering the news stories), but more often they were shaping the affective tone (Sheafer 2007) or substantive elements in news stories (Golan and Wanta 2001), what is known as second-level agenda building (Kiouisis et al. 2011). Wilder's tweets are newsworthy partly due to the fact that he avoids talking to the media, which makes his tweets more valuable to

political reporters. But there is more to Wilders' tweets than simply a lack of access to the man himself. A closer read of the character of his tweets reveals that political critique accounted for more than half the tweets cited. Such tweets were typically attack oriented, often provocative, and sensational in nature—the kind of tweets that grab people's attention and sell newspapers—as one Dutch political journalist stated: 'Wilders' tweets are often newsworthy because they are fierce and touch on sensitive issues' (Brands 2014: 86).

Our analysis does provide some hope to those scholars arguing for the opening up of political news coverage to alternative sources. We did see a sharp increase in the use of ordinary citizens' tweets as news sources during the 2012 general election campaign, accounting for nearly a third of the tweets cited (31%). This is up 10% from news coverage of the 2010 general election (Broersma and Graham 2012), suggesting an upward trend. Given that elections are partly about what voters want, it seems natural that journalists would use tweets as a means of illustrating the opinions or beliefs of ordinary citizens. At least during elections, Twitter seems to have the capacity to increase the diversity of voices by also including non-elite sources, which are not readily available (both in terms of quantity and variety) other than via social media platforms like Twitter (see also Broersma and Graham 2013; Paulussen and Harder 2014).

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**Part III**  
**Online Civic Engagement and the Public**  
**Sphere**

# Chapter 10

## New Rituals for Public Connection: Audiences' Everyday Experiences of Digital Journalism, Civic Engagement, and Social Life

Joëlle Swart, Chris Peters, and Marcel Broersma

### Introduction

News media have long been bridging the gaps between individuals and everything that lies beyond their private spheres, from local communities to the country and international public spaces. Providing packages of neatly organized information on current affairs that could affect its audiences, journalism established itself as a major access point to society. For decades, practices of consuming newspapers and broadcasts have been strongly interwoven with people's other daily routines, such as having breakfast while reading the headlines or listening to the radio news bulletin while driving to work. However, the digitalization of the news media landscape may cause a process of "de-ritualization" (Broersma and Peters 2013) of such news practices. Users can now navigate an almost unlimited range of news sources on their own terms, available at any moment, in any place, on multiple devices, and in various forms. These opportunities create novel and increasingly diverse patterns of news use. Moreover, anyone with the right equipment and basic digital literacy can now publish and redistribute public information to potentially large audiences through blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and other social media tools, without having to depend on news media organizations. This means that the newspapers and broadcasters that traditionally provided audiences with the current information needed to navigate everyday life face increasing competition from alternative sources,

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challenging the idea of journalistic institutions as major societal access points for finding out about and making sense of the issues of the day.

Of course, journalism has never been the only tool to connect people to public life. However, to experience parts of the world beyond their own communities, audiences have traditionally depended strongly on newspapers and broadcasters to make such information accessible and available. Digitalization and its consequences for how news is produced, used, and distributed erode this privileged position of journalism. First, declining subscription and viewing rates show that attention to the public information spread by legacy news media institutions can no longer be assumed (Markham 2015), meaning that newspapers and broadcasters may become less valuable as shared frames of reference within society. Second, the affordances of new platforms, devices, and technologies allow for many novel forms of engaging with news outside of journalism institutions, ranging from liking Instagram photos to forming discussion groups on Whatsapp. Users are no longer dependent on news media institutions to voice their concerns or to find like-minded others to form collectives with, lowering the threshold for civic participation (Gauntlett 2011). Third, news use is becoming less centered around fixed times, places, or patterns of everyday life, which alters what news “is” and “does” for us (Peters 2015). Such changes in news circulation transform “the very ground beneath our feet: ambient flows of news re-situate how we understand where we are, who we are connected with, what our ‘present’ moment actually is” (Sheller 2015, p. 24). Finally, digitalization has resulted in an expansion of available information and novel tools that help users to shift through, make sense of, and engage with such data (Hoelig 2016). Such news can give people new opportunities to become motivated, form objectives, and act to advance such interests.

This study aims to make sense of these shifts in what has been termed “mediated public connection” (Couldry et al. 2007), by exploring how news media are functioning as tools for their users to connect to public life in a digitalized media landscape. It employs in-depth interviews and Q methodology among a group of Dutch news users of mixed gender, age, and educational level in three different regions, to find patterns of how people are using different news media—digital and non-digital—to orient to and engage in larger social, cultural, civic, and political frameworks. In previous literature, such transformations and the possibilities afforded by new media have typically been explored in light of the values and expectations that members of a certain political system or culture may aspire towards, for example through notions of deliberative or participatory democracy, information seeking, civic engagement, and so forth (e.g., Dahlgren 2000; Ekström et al. 2014; Strömbäck 2005). However, rather than relying on such notions, we propose that a framework grounded in everyday life practices and preferences may paint a more accurate picture of such “rituals of public connection” amidst a rapidly developing news media landscape. Such an approach emphasizes public connection as a process, rather than an ideal that needs to be achieved, invites public connection researchers to critically interrogate to what extent their theoretical assertions align with people’s lived experiences, and incorporates both political and cultural facets of connection, including their interrelation.

Thus, this chapter discusses whether or not digitalization facilitates new patterns of using news media for connecting to public life, and if so how, starting from the practices and preferences of the news user. Previous work on public connection has stressed that with increasing choice, the “constellation of news media on which one individual draws may be quite different than another’s” (Couldry et al. 2007, pp. 190–191), suggesting that we may expect a radical diversification of how people come to encounter, process, and apply public information. This study instead finds that current patterns of mediated public connection might more accurately be described as a “re-ritualization” of public connection, in which existing and novel practices become intertwined. Rather than completely reinventing, it alters the ways people engage with/through news, whom and what this connects them to, and thus how, when, where, and why news becomes incorporated in the flow of their everyday lives. Before discussing our empirical findings, however, we will first elaborate on the study’s theoretical background: previous conceptualizations of public connection and the changing rituals of using news and public information for navigating everyday life.

## Ritualization, De-ritualization, Re-ritualization?

Academic interest in the societal integrative function of the news has a long history, dating decades back to Berelson’s classic study in 1949 of “what missing the newspaper means.” Researching the effect of a 1945 newspaper strike on its audience, Berelson concluded that being deprived of your newspaper creates an emotional loss that goes beyond missing certain information. He found that the strike interrupted participants’ daily structure and their sense of being connected to public life. Over the past decades, numerous studies have confirmed these findings, stating that following the news and exchanging public information with others creates community and sociability and thus exceeds informational purposes (e.g., Carey 1989; Bentley 2001; Yamamoto 2011). The concept of “public connection” builds upon this understanding, starting from the premise that as individuals we require some commonality or overlap to link up to others and to engage and participate in society. People seek this connection as political citizens, neighbors, colleagues, friends, and in the many other roles they play within everyday life (Heikkilä et al. 2010; Kaun 2012; Ong and Cabañes 2011; Schröder 2015). The news is one form of such social glue and traditionally has played a major role in binding people together. Even before the invention of journalism, people exchanged information about what was going on to foster togetherness. Thus, the concept of “mediated public connection” (Couldry et al. 2007) is about the generic and relatively neutral orientation the news offers towards a public space, that can, but does not automatically, result in forms of engagement and participation (Dahlgren 2009). News allows people to experience publicness: the accessible, the visible, and ideally the universal and the collective (Coleman and Ross 2010). Such a public space can be political (citizens of a nation state) or civic (volunteers for a charity), but also of a social (a sports team) or

cultural nature (speakers of a certain language). We thus define public connection here as *the shared frames of reference that enable individuals to engage and participate in cultural, social, civic, and political networks in everyday life* (see also Swart et al. 2016b).

This is not to say that the news is uniquely suited to this task. Numerous other avenues—from schools and universities to the workplace and from religious institutions to nongovernmental organizations—can also facilitate forms of public connection.<sup>1</sup> This is reflected in the fact that public connection is inherent to many other scholarly concepts that are not necessarily invoked in direct relation to news or journalism, from cultural citizenship, social cohesion, and community to civic participation, social capital, and models of democracy (see Bakardjieva 2003; Barnhurst 2003; Baym 2010; Bennett et al. 2011; Boulianne 2009; Shah et al. 2001). However, unlike many other alternative means for public connection, news is not bound to any specific period in life, nor is it dependent on any place or form. News can also travel in everyday conversations while waiting for the bus or picking up your child from school. Moreover, rather than focusing on a clearly delineated target audience, the news typically aims to reach a heterogeneous and large public, as mirrored in the mass media's one-size-fits-all news products. This genericness enabled newspapers and broadcasters to establish themselves as the main bridges between people's public and private spaces throughout the previous century. Even nowadays at a time when traditional journalistic institutions struggle to retain their audiences, large numbers of people still engage in daily rituals of attending to news for public information.

Recent technological developments, in theory, may make news media even more prevailing for public connection. After all, in a media-saturated world where digital technologies allow us to retrieve updates everywhere at any time, with a lower threshold to share information with others than ever before, news media and their content have become almost impossible to escape. This ubiquity makes the news a major opportunity for individuals to connect to one another. Yet, most work on public connection does not focus on news as a tool to connect to public life, with a few notable exceptions (e.g., Heikkilä and Ahva 2015; Couldry and Markham 2008; Ekström et al. 2014; Ong and Cabañes 2011; Vidali 2010). This study therefore addresses public connection through *news media* specifically.

At the same time, there may be reason to believe that news media are becoming less important sources for people's public connection in the current media landscape. While digitalization has vastly increased the volume of news and enables people to consume news on a multitude of platforms, everywhere and all the time, the resulting high-choice media environment also allows users to choose their own individual trajectories across the wealth of available content. Instead of engaging with news in relatively predictable patterns, they have obtained more power to simply ignore information that is not to their taste. People's ways of consuming and using news therefore may have become so varied that attention to journalistic

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<sup>1</sup>Similarly, news use can be motivated by many incentives, one of them being public connection.

outlets—previously strongly embedded in daily patterns, such as the evening news bulletin—or even to news and public affairs information in general can no longer be presumed, leading to scholarly concerns about journalism's societal integrative function, the extent to which it still functions as a collective frame of reference, and its legitimacy (see for example Boczkowski and Mitchelstein 2013; Couldry et al. 2007). Especially when it comes to conceptualizations of public connection that have a strong focus on the role of news for citizens to fulfill their political duties within democracies, such a de-ritualization of news use (Broersma and Peters 2013) would be problematic if it continues unabated, because it starts from the normative expectation that such fixed rituals of regular news consumption facilitate citizens' attention to public issues. This then in turn equips citizens with the necessary tools and information for engagement and participation in the political system or the civic culture (e.g., Dahlgren 2000; Ekström et al. 2014; Strömbäck 2005). If news media indeed no longer provide public connection, in this model, that means it will also no longer foster the civic participation democracy derives its legitimacy from.

Another more culturally oriented tradition in public connection research, which perceives the topic from the perspective of everyday life, offers a third option. This perspective does not attempt to analyze mediated public connection from the collective framework of a political or civic structure, studying how people *should* use news media for public connection, but considers it from the actual daily practices and experiences of the news user instead. Thus, it explores how news media *are being used* to connect to the different networks people are part of in everyday life. Rather than viewing public connection as a political ideal, it pays attention to the process by which people are applying journalism as a tool to navigate within all the public realms they engage in (e.g., Heikkilä et al. 2010; Schrøder 2015). In other words, instead of testing whether news media are successful in generating public engagement in the digital age, it starts with the question what, in terms of public connection, the societal value and relevance of news media (still) is to people. In the context of a rapidly changing news media landscape that can quickly render top-down created communication models outdated, such a perspective has the advantage of enabling a more user-centric and bottom-up view on public connection, thus staying close to people's everyday experiences. Possibly, current mediated public connection practices cannot be characterized in terms of long-existing rituals that are being prolonged to a digitalized news landscape, nor as a fully completed de-ritualization in which patterns of public connection can no longer be distinguished, but rather a *re-ritualization* in which the interaction between old and new media logics leads users to adopt habits of connecting to public life (for related notions on broader processes of media change and adaptation see Chadwick (2013) on the idea of hybrid media or Bolter and Grusin (2000) on remediation). Earlier studies have already hinted towards such adapted rituals of connection and engagement. For example, the “checking cycle” as a currently dominant mode of mobile news use (Costera Meijer and Groot Kormelink 2014) was preceded by long-standing efforts to have “live news” and “breaking news.” Similarly, predecessors of “micropolitics” and “self-actualizing citizenship” (Bennett et al. 2011, Banaji and Buckingham 2013, Banaji and

Cammaerts 2015) can be found in practices such as news talk and other long-standing noninstitutional forms of civic participation.

Several conceptual angles can be employed to study news users' practices and rituals of mediated public connection. This study focuses on two that are especially pertinent to help contextualize our findings: engagement and relevance. Engagement relates to the specific ways and means by which people connect through news. Users can choose from a wide array of sources to connect to public life, from traditional news media to countless digital alternatives. Moreover, there are many different practices through which they can engage with these outlets. A large body of research has debated which of these should or should not be defined as being forms of public engagement: for example, whether it is limited to a behavioral dimension or also includes civic awareness; whether such engagement is political, nonpolitical, or can be both; and whether it solely includes collective or also individual activities (e.g., Adler and Goggin 2005; Banaji and Buckingham 2013; Ekman and Amnå 2012). However, what many of these studies neglect is what engaging or disengaging actually means to users. Why are some news use practices and news outlets more meaningful for connecting publicly than others? The second dimension in this study, relevance, considers the underlying reasons why people seek to connect to society through the news and how their practices of mediated public connection are embedded in their everyday lives. Put differently, what makes mediated public connection more than just repetitions of behavior, and gives it the overarching meaning and symbolic power that turns it from a simple habit into a complex ritual (Couldry 2003)? Both of these questions cannot be addressed in detail without a user-oriented perspective.

## Methodology

To analyze how news users are using news media as a tool to experience and shape their public connection, this study employed 36 in-depth, semi-structured interviews including a Q methodology card sorting exercise with concurrent think-aloud protocol. Participants were selected using quota sampling, collecting respondents of mixed gender, age, and educational level in three different regions to ensure a demographically varied sample.<sup>2</sup>

Each interview, held from October to December 2014, was composed of three successive stages. In the first phase, the day-in-the-life interview, participants were

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<sup>2</sup>Twelve participants were selected within each age group (18–35, 35–60, 61+), 12 participants within each educational subgroup (primary and/or secondary education, vocational education, university education), and 12 participants within each region (Amsterdam, the regional city of Groningen, and rural parts of the Netherlands). Our sample consisted of 18 males and 18 females. Participants in Amsterdam were recruited through the online marketing panel of publishing house De Persgroep. Participants in the Groningen area were sampled through online marketing panel RegioNoord.

asked to describe their previous workday and to recall their news use from the moment they awoke until they went to bed. This stage served to map the everyday life context of participants' patterns of news use, focusing on their recall without giving any prompts. Moreover, it prepared interviewees to talk about their news values and experiences in the succeeding phases of the interview. In the second stage, participants were asked to perform a card-sorting exercise based on Q methodology (see Michelle et al. 2012; Watts and Stenner 2012), to measure the importance of different news media within participants' daily life. They received a deck of 36 cards, each containing one category of news media such as "news blogs" or "print news magazines," with multiple examples within that category. This set was carefully designed to represent the entire Dutch news media landscape and, together with the interview guide, previously tested in a small-scale pilot ( $N = 5$ ). While thinking aloud about their decision-making criteria, interviewees then sorted all cards on a normally distributed grid, ranging from "does not play a role in my daily life" to "plays a large role in my daily life." This fairly open operationalization of "value" allowed participants to define the concept themselves, avoiding presupposing that the importance of news media is always dependent on similar considerations, such as its usefulness for public connection. The third and final part of the interview focused more closely on the topic of public connection, using a semi-structured, in-depth interview. In this part, participants reflected on themes such as the value of news in maintaining social connections, news talk, sense of belonging to society, non-mediated sources for public connection, opinion formation, civic engagement, normative pressures, and disconnection. All interviews were recorded and then fully transcribed.

For the analysis of the transcripts, we used a grounded theory-inspired approach (Charmaz 2006). First, every interview was coded line by line in software program Atlas.ti to generate a list of initial codes. Second, we developed a list of focused codes by testing the most frequent initial codes against the total data set. Finally, from the results of the focused coding, theoretical codes were formed and tested. Results relating to the participants' composition of news media repertoires and the value of news in general have been reported in an earlier study (see Swart et al. 2016a). This chapter instead focuses on how news media are being used as tools for the purpose of public connection specifically, and thus relies more heavily on the final stage of the interview.

## Results

### *New Media, New Routines?*

The current news landscape is characterized by an abundance of media choice. Thus, one would expect a strong shift and diversification of how people are using media to keep up with public affairs. In practice, however, participants' news

routines appeared relatively stable. Participants in our study owned at least one mobile device and had access to a wide range of digital news outlets: from interactive television services with possibilities to watch hundreds of channels from all over the globe to log-in codes shared by friends or neighbors to be able to read newspapers online, to subscriptions to investigative long-form journalism outlet *De Correspondent* and credit for pay-per-newspaper-article service Blendle, among others. However, while this increase in media choice was appreciated, it did not always translate into actual use. For example, Ivo (51)<sup>3</sup> enthusiastically spoke about the opportunity to now watch programs on demand, but during the same interview described his television use as a fixed routine of live watching, heavily centered around set broadcasting times. Especially among the participants in our study aged over 35, practices such as tuning into the 8 o'clock news or listening to the radio while driving the car persisted. Moreover, when digitalization had created novel habits of mediated public connection, these were typically complementary rather than replacing existing routines. And even for respondents whose news media repertoire (Hasebrink and Domeyer 2012) was exclusively composed of online public information outlets, their patterns of digital news use were strongly influenced by earlier media habits.

The continuing influence of old news use routines was reflected most clearly in how interviewees talked about media trust. When searching for information on a public issue, Lars (28) would select websites that he already knew, to ensure that it would be "quality news." Similarly, legacy news brands played a major role in verifying news from noninstitutional sources on social media during breaking news events. Emma (53) said that she refrained from sharing news on Twitter until "official" channels would confirm it: "For me, that's the NOS [Dutch public broadcaster], and those kind of things." Although these news users could access many news sources, the news brands consumed before and after their adoption of digital devices showed a great similarity. Carlo (29) and Floor (30) switched their print newspaper subscriptions for digital editions to be able to read them on their commute, Paul (55) only installed apps of broadcasters on his smartphone he already knew from watching television in the past, and Karel (68) and Felicia (59) had subscribed to e-mail newsletters and Facebook status updates of newspapers and magazines which they had consumed in print for years. Here, digital news media were simply another means to collect content of the same brands in a manner that provided a better situational fit (easier reading on a crowded train) or offered a greater relative advantage (not having to pay, but still obtaining an overview of the major headlines). Because in this case the brands consumed did not change and journalistic institutions distribute similar content across channels, the public issues encountered also remained more or less the same.

At the same time, our data showed multiple news routines that are new to the digitalized media landscape. First, digital mediated public connection does not center exclusively around news brands, but around individuals as well. While as

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<sup>3</sup>Participants are mentioned by pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

before journalistic institutions still bring most news, other individuals have become increasingly important for guiding people's attention to it in an overload of available content. As Elise (32) remarked, one of the advantages of following news on social media platforms is that it makes you aware of the news that your friends and other connections consume: "Lots of my friends are on *De Correspondent* nowadays, and Blendle, and they share that on Facebook. So you'll see the news use of your friends." This sharing and re-sharing of news articles regularly led her to news websites that she normally would not visit herself. Some respondents followed journalists, artists, politicians, and other public figures on Twitter, offering them a different route towards current affairs. Floor (28): "It gives me an extra layer of how you can continue with news. After something has been published, what the world does with it." Following these people helped her understand what exactly news stories meant and what consequences news events might have. Ad hoc updates by tweeting journalists and other public figures that give an insight into their everyday lives may thus for some provide a more engaging perspective on news and public affairs. For example, Evert (26) usually ignored content from news institutions, considering what he named "the socially responsible components" of the news fairly boring, but was very interested in how other people were leading their lives.

Second, for participants that regularly make use of their smartphones or tablets, checking the news has become an almost continuous activity so immersed in everyday life patterns, that it can hardly be recognized as a distinct action anymore (see also Deuze 2012). Similar to newspaper subscribers reading the headlines at the kitchen table over breakfast with a coffee in hand or the late-night news for television viewers, checking your two to four favorite news apps signaled the beginning and the end of the day. In between, this was repeated throughout the day during commute, while at work, during lunch break, after work on the couch in front of the TV, right up until switching off the lights, and going to sleep. Sometimes the same checking habits even persisted across platforms. Edwin (37) started the day by checking the app of newspaper *de Volkskrant* on his phone in the morning and then continued to check the website of the same paper on his laptop during work, even though this meant that he would view a lot of information twice. He explained: "[First], I check, scan, what I find interesting and I'll register it for later that day [to consume] through the full websites, because I find it pleasurable to view it on a big screen. I can click through there and delve into things that really interest me." Many participants mentioned that they had come to follow the news more closely and more extensively because of their mobile devices, and that their time spent with news had increased for this was complementing rather than replacing previous news habits. For instance, holidays that used to be spent without any news at all, completely disconnecting from home, now involved starting the day with digital papers on a tablet. Even participants who did not use their mobile devices frequently mentioned having a better sense of the news than they did 2 or 3 years prior, now that others had access to it everywhere and anytime and would tell others around them when they received an important notification. This was not necessarily considered a positive development, as news becomes very difficult to escape and inextricably linked to many other activities, invoking



feelings of news overload. Bart (62) complained that his colleagues would no longer have a chat with him during lunch breaks, but instead spent their downtime with media, causing him to pick up the newspaper too. "It's not about the newspaper, it's just flipping through. Spending time during the break. That's how everyone does it. They're all apping, on their phones you know, awful. Or they get the newspaper. That's it. That's having a break nowadays." Some participants dealt with this by using apps to save news for later, such as Pocket, or by placing it in tabs in their web browser. Yet, these tactics meant that news was still on in the background all the time, making it an easy distraction when faced with difficult tasks at work.

Finally, the information participants kept up with daily through apps and social media was much more diverse than the traditional delineations of the genre of news would suggest. Next to the following of interesting individuals and friends sharing articles from news media organizations as described above, timelines were filled with many interpersonal updates, posts of interest groups and NGOs, fake news, funny videos, inspiring quotes, announcements of political organizations, updates from celebrity news sites, and so forth. Of course, people have always kept up with multiple types of information, but these genres tended to be more or less separate and were consumed in different places. Now, social media blend all of these into one constant stream of updates in which journalists' news coverage is placed between cat pictures and cake recipes, broadening people's perceptions of what exactly it means to "follow the news" or be up to date. From an article about the production of synthetic meat and YouTube videos on novel printing techniques to the review of a theater show and the latest plastic surgery of Angelina Jolie, a wide selection of updates were all classified by participants as "news," even though these did not always tick the boxes of traditional news values such as conflict, timeliness, or impact (see Harcup and O'Neill 2001). That said, participants were very aware of the strong association of the term "news" with traditional contents of journalism institutions, which remains powerful in everyday speech. For instance, Nadine (29) described Facebook as a place where you "don't receive the real, national news. That doesn't always pass by on Facebook and that's why I find it very useful to have the radio on in the car." Yet, at the same time, she ranked the platform as the news medium playing the largest role in her everyday life, as the medium was crucial for her to connect with her social and professional network. Thus, although not always labeled as "news" to acknowledge the difference with traditional journalistic content, participants' perceptions of what information was needed to keep up with to stay connected were broadening.

In other words, while news media still constitute a major source for people's mediated public connection, these three shifts in what current news use entails together create a variety of possibilities to access and engage with public information: from the use of messaging apps for news to having Twitter feeds as a wallpaper at work. Therefore, they expand our understandings of what engaging or disengaging in a digitalized media landscape is and means. However, to argue that digitalization causes a re-ritualization of mediated public connection, an

additional element is necessary: these novel patterns need to carry a symbolic power, which we will turn to next.

### *New Habits, New Rituals?*

For repeated action to be more than merely a habit and become a ritual, it needs to embody some sort of transcendent value sustaining the routine (Couldry 2003). Many studies have discussed such rituals in the context of media use and journalism (e.g., Carey 1989; Dayan and Katz 1994; Silverstone 1994). The most apparent example is the traditional connection between regular news use routines and supporting citizenship or democracy (Schudson 1998). A few of our participants still echoed this sentiment, such as Floris (33). “Without media, problems are not being exposed, injustice is not addressed, there is no transparency about the people who decide things for you. [. . .] I think we should take care that the quality of the news is maintained and that we stay interested in topics that matter. Not the life of a Dutch celebrity.” However, the link between news use and citizenship becomes less straightforward now that citizenship can be enacted in many different ways, moving from normatively “forced,” dutiful behavior centered around formal rights and duties to self-actualizing, more individualized forms of civic engagement and participation that do not necessarily have anything to do with journalism (Bennett et al. 2011; Banaji and Cammaerts 2015; Miller 2007). If the idea of dutiful consumption of traditional journalism outlets loses power, what values do current practices of news use for public connection represent? In other words, can we view novel practices of mediated public connection as rituals, and if so, what sustains them?

First, as mentioned above, the news can invoke a sense of belonging and “togetherness” in certain groups (Bakardjieva 2003). Because media are present in so many everyday situations, news use and other recurring practices are likely to become linked. Therefore, our mundane news use routines (i.e., listening to the radio in the morning) can come to act as means to become integrated in social situations (sharing an experience as a family) (Larsen 2000). Whereas in Bakardjieva’s study on messaging boards, “virtual togetherness” was still limited to certain places and specific publics, being a conscious and separate activity, for current news users such connection is continuous and closely interwoven with people’s off-line social networks and daily routines. For Nathalie (27), for instance, news on Facebook was an important tool to maintain her friendships with friends living abroad: “I see them twice, three times a year at most. Then we can catch up, but the rest of the time it’s like: have you read this? Here’s an article you might find interesting. I found this, what do you think?” Push notifications and social media apps constantly invite users to transcend their “narrowly private existence and navigate the social world” (Bakardjieva 2003, p. 294) and consume and share news with others, highlighting its connective potentialities. Exchanging information increases your value in social relationships, strengthens existing bonds, and

shows that you care about others (see also Hermida 2014). Bianca (40) for instance described texting friends about breaking news as a favor, one that they were likely to return later.

Closely related to the value of social connection is connecting through news as a form of self-presentation and professionalism. Consuming and sharing news do not only help forming bonds with others, but also create the image that one is knowledgeable, engaged in society, and interested in others. For instance, Nina (30) said that being well-informed about current affairs gave her “confidence” in her conversations with others, because it meant she always had a shared frame of reference she could rely on, no matter who she was meeting. “That if we would meet each other in the train for example, that you just know what is going on.” Regular news use, according to our participants, makes you feel good about yourself for adhering to existing social norms. Most frequently, this importance of keeping up with news and public affairs was linked to the context of being a professional employee. While following the news typically was not an official part of their roles, for many participants, keeping up with changes in their industries made their jobs easier by enhancing communication with others in the company or providing information relevant for their daily tasks. Moreover, they felt that their clients and colleagues expected them to stay up to date on developments in their industry. In other social contexts too, it was perceived as desirable to appear up to date on current affairs and as engaged in society. Participants frequently stressed that they found it important that people had regard for and aimed to understand others outside of their own circles, saying that their news use was a part of how they personally demonstrated this quality. While civic engagement thus remains publicly valued, this was no longer necessarily tied to reading the newspaper, or similarly other institution-related practices such as party membership or union involvement. Instead, engaging with issues encountered through news took shape in a wide variety of small-scale, issue-based, and utilitarian forms offering not only public engagement, but also some individual gain. For example, Daniël (33) started growing his own vegetables out of concern about the workings of the food industry after seeing a critical documentary—saving money at the same time—and Carlo (29) swapped his print for digital subscriptions out of environmental concerns—but also for practical reasons. Some participants even considered the act of paying for news, instead of relying on one of the many freely available alternatives, as a form of civic engagement, feeling obliged to financially support media.

Third, respondents linked their practices of mediated public connection to the feelings of control and security. Many participants expressed their desire to be on top of things, which due to the increased speed of the news cycle may cost more effort than before. Instead of informing oneself at a fixed time, being up to date now requires continuously checking the news throughout the day. While being on top of things partially relates back to the previously discussed issue of self-presentation and normative expectations of others, most importantly, participants linked their practices of mediated public connection to having control over public issues that might affect you, remarking that “not always, but often, there are news items related to you” (Dominique, 24). Monitoring the news closely (see Schudson 1998) gave

them the confidence that they would know when any public issue would affect them and required a response.

While sometimes the link between the issues presented in the news and participants' personal lives was self-evident—news about your neighborhood, or your profession—for much news, connections were not so easy to understand. After all, many news events do not concern you directly and are extraordinary instances, rather than examples of slow, societal change. The fact that news traditionally is about the new, rare, and unexpected (see Harcup and O'Neill 2001) means that almost by definition it ignores the mundane, the familiar, and the well known that enables users to identify with and recognize themselves in the content of news media. This is why many participants complained about the “superficial” (Lars, 28) character of the news. Louise (64) argued that the news should contain less one-time events such as accidents: “Those [are] news stories where all you can do is think: ‘oh’.” Rather, Louise would hear a story about ongoing issues, because “you can still do something about that.” When asked how the news could facilitate people's sense of agency more effectively, Edwin (37) described the website of a commercial broadcaster that, after many news items, referred to a page where users could find out more about how such information affected their personal situation. “They do that in a fairly simple way, how they present it textually, but they offer you the kind of information that you normally would Google yourself and search somewhere else.” Thus, even small tools may already enhance the perceived relevance and constructiveness of news.

### *The Importance of Social Networks*

Up to this point, our analysis has been mainly focused on news in the context of journalism. However, our data clearly demonstrate another source for connecting to public life through news: interpersonal communication (see also Heikkilä and Ahva 2015; McCollough et al. 2016). Whether it was while working out at the gym, having a beer in the pub, or getting coffee at work, “just talking to people” (Paul, 55) served as a significant source for public information, even when participants were not actively searching for news. Interpersonal mediated public connection has the advantage of being much more targeted towards one's personal interests and concerns than journalistic reporting, addressing a heterogeneous audience, can be. Moreover, it gives people the opportunity to immediately connect news to other fragmented public events and their everyday lives, and thus make sense of the issues discussed. Especially for hyperlocal issues, face-to-face conversations often proved more useful than consuming news media to find out what was going on, for mainstream news coverage was usually not as detailed. For René (63), the customers in his restaurant were also a quicker source for local news: “News in the neighborhood, I'd sometimes know that before the municipality did. You are approachable, people come to you often with news in the neighborhood. That can be a drugs raid, but also a neighbor who broke her leg.” Bianca (40) even named a

specific person as a news source: her father. She explained that she frequently heard about changes in the neighborhood because he volunteered for local civic organizations. “That’s someone I regularly talk to. For example during the elections, we will call each other to discuss what we think and why. Then you have some additional information.” This shows that while much of the public information discussed may of course have originated from journalism, news also has the potential to facilitate public connection outside of journalism.

Social media have made part of these everyday conversations about news publicly accessible, allowing users to discuss issues in the news with a much wider public than would be possible off-line. Moreover, they are both a place for news consumption and news discussion, making them convenient sources for public connection. Most social media users in our sample had at least one friend that was interested in public issues and likely to share breaking news with them if they learned that an event had happened. For Kevin (30), this worked so efficiently that he no longer consumed any journalism directly at all, instead relying on his connections telling him about important events on Whatsapp. “My biggest news source at the moment are my friends and colleagues. That’s not an official news source, and it’s all second-hand, but it is my biggest source of information. I also don’t need more.” Thus, after journalism, social networks become a second filter on public information.

Few participants in our sample shared news on social media themselves. Especially on more open social platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, they refrained from commenting or posting content. Privacy concerns played a major role here, as the setup of these platforms makes it difficult for users to know their exact audience beforehand. Typically, participants would only accept followers or friends that they also knew in non-virtual life. As Felicia (59) put it, she would add someone on Facebook only if it would be someone she’d say hi to when crossing him or her on the street. Being a teacher, she even had purposefully created two profiles, one for personal and one for professional use, so her students wouldn’t be able to see her private information. In some cases, social media were a useful tool to stay in touch with others across large geographical distances, but generally, participants preferred sharing information face to face as it was more closed off and could easily be integrated with other social activities. Floor (30), for example, quit commenting on Facebook on news stories because of negative responses in her social circles: “I try to keep myself from commenting now. I haven’t done it in a long time. But a few weeks ago, I can’t even remember what the discussion was about, I replied to someone and all my friends saw that in their timelines. I received texts, even from friends in Groningen: what the hell are you doing on Facebook?” Because of the public nature of Facebook or Twitter, people apparently are expected to refrain from discussing sensitive or negative issues on these platforms. Rather, participants would talk about public issues within a more closed setting, discussing them face to face, on the phone, or through private messaging services such as Whatsapp. This app was popular among interviewees for exchanging news, because its setup of one-on-one conversations and small-group chats offered users very fine-grained control over who could view shared content. Even though most websites do not offer a

Whatsapp sharing button, meaning it requires relatively more manual labor compared to alternative social platforms, specifically the younger participants in our sample regularly received news updates this way.

News media content was regularly used as a reference point in daily conversation whenever considered relevant for the other person. As Ivo (51) explained when discussing recent earthquakes near his town: "There are a few people who are close to it, who've experienced it, or who are involved because of their jobs. Then I'll talk about it with them. That's in my social circles, news that concerns you here. I'm not going to ask them about events far away." However, participants' personal conversations and the news they encountered in the media tended to center around different types of concerns: interpersonal issues stem from specific worries about the well-being of friends and family, whereas journalistic news by nature is more universal. Nadine (27) for instance noted that relying solely on discussions on Facebook for public information would "give you a bit odd view of the world" and listening to the radio was therefore an essential addition to her mediated public connection. Interesting were cases when respondents noted that a topic that was prevalent in their everyday conversations should be included by journalistic institutions, but felt it was left out or should be addressed differently or more frequently. For example, when the late husband of Bregje (62) fell ill, he was unable to receive sufficient medical care due to a lack of staff in the local hospital. She wrote letters about this to newspapers and politicians to voice these issues, but felt that her concerns were not being recognized or understood. Floris (33) in his job experienced some concerning effects of a new policy moving the major political responsibility for health care from the governmental level to that of the municipality, but noticed that the local newspaper hardly covered the issue. An interesting follow-up question for news organizations here would be how they can effectively tap into these kinds of public discussions, of which a large majority still appear to take place off-line.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we have explored users' habits and rituals of using news to connect to public life in a digitalized media landscape. Our interviews confirm that, despite declining newspaper circulations and broadcaster viewing rates suggesting otherwise, people's need for public connection has not declined (Couldry et al. 2007; Eliasoph 1998; McCollough et al. 2016). On the contrary: through social media news sharing, the continuous availability of news through smartphones, and interpersonal conversations about current affairs in a wide range of places, participants may be more connected than ever before. The news, as some of our less publicly interested respondents lamented, has become almost impossible to escape. While the current news landscape provides opportunities for users to circumvent journalism with individual-to-individual news sharing, we found that news media institutions still serve as major platforms for public connection. Rather than a complete

“de-ritualization” of mediated public connection practices, wherein no common trajectories for connecting to public life and thus no shared frames of reference can be discerned anymore, digitalization facilitates a “re-ritualization” of public connection through news. While news users still seek togetherness, self-presentation, and control through news, as demonstrated above, the interaction between traditional and new media logics forms many novel patterns of engagement to fulfill these needs that are more diverse, less distinct, more utilitarian, and increasingly facilitated through people’s social networks.

Most notably, these new habits of engaging with and based upon news show that public connection through news no longer necessarily equals public connection through journalism. Even though participants felt that the abundance in news media choice meant there was always something suiting their personal preferences, there are many more non-journalistic alternatives available than before. Such connection through social networks rather than journalism has three advantages. First, it may provide a better link between audiences’ particular concerns and the news, as content spread by journalistic institutions tends to be less tailored and more generic. Second, it makes it easier to situate news in users’ contexts of everyday life and connect to long-term developments, for it allows for consuming and making sense of news at the same time. Third, news from social networks may prove a better match with what users perceive as public issues requiring discussion and solutions than journalistic news does. After all, while digitalization has allowed people to voice their concerns more easily, listening and responding to such topics in everyday conversations is still proving a challenging task for journalistic institutions (see also Heikkilä and Ahva 2015).

More importantly, we have aimed to show how a focus on the news user is crucial to understand mediated public connection in a rapidly changing news media landscape. Rather than starting from normative points of view on how mediated public connection is supposed to take place, our analysis has started from people’s experiences, asking when exactly news media are and are not perceived as engaging or relevant for connecting to public life. At a time where users are moving away from traditional news media and increasingly use other means to find out about public life, such insights into how news media become meaningful as avenues for public connection may become key to understanding and preventing potential disconnection and maintaining journalism’s societal value.

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# Chapter 11

## Social Media as Civic Space for Media Criticism and Journalism Hate

Göran Svensson

### Media Change, Social Media, and Media Criticism

#### *Introduction*

When media change, so does the discussion of the media in the media. With the coming of new and digital media, the discussion in media about media could construct two approaches for that discussion. The discussion could be framed from the old media looking at the new or from the new looking at the old, combining self-reflection and analysis and critique of the “other.” The discourses could be connected in different ways, and representatives of the different kinds of medias could also move between them—symbolically and physically. Doing a career as a critic of old media in new media could pave the way for a good job as an analyst of new media in old media. Getting linked, getting liked and getting cited would be a way for old media to have an impact in new media. Being reviewed, being cited and becoming visible would be a way for new media to have an impact in old media. Developing dialogue and enhancing understanding might be expected outcomes. This is the general setting for this small study of discussion and critique of mainstream media in a Swedish social media discussion forum.

Media and journalism are in flux and new ways of approaching the study of them are emerging (Peters and Broersma 2013). The metaphor of software development is being used as an acronym for this as a discrete change - 1.0, 2.0, X.0 - or for incremental change - 1.1, 1.2, 1.X. In media studies David Gauntlett was an early advocate of a switch to media studies 2.0 (Gauntlett 2011) and at the moment there are signs for a 3.0 to be advocated. The rethinking has to be rethought (Peters and

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Broersma 2016) and new media becomes “new new” media quite fast (Levinson 2009). Profound change is also framed as a disruption of the established media systems and institutions; the digital development is seen as such in both economic and social terms. Beyond the discrete changes of software generations we are entering into a new society and new cultures. Such digital social and cultural formations can also be studied with the idea of disruption as a force of resistance and contestation using digital media and culture (Lindgren 2013).

In this chapter specific attention is paid to Flashback, a Swedish discussion forum, as an arena of media criticism and how it can offer space for a mix of dialogue and confrontation. One discussion thread on Flashback is analyzed with special attention towards how the relation between a journalist and anonymous critics of journalism is developed on the forum and in the thread. The social relations between participants of the discussion are tracked and how they describe and comment upon this relation. The discussion thread is further analyzed in terms of the intentions of the participants, the objects of critique, and the process of discussion. The process is studied by looking at phases of the discussion thread, the social relations established and the occurrence of specific cultures and practices of critique and accountability (Svensson 2015) expressed and enacted by the participants. The match or mismatch between forms of critique and forms of accountability can be used for analyzing the discussion thread. Analyzing the thread using this model will give us better knowledge on how media change and discussion and critique of media and journalism are linked.

The theoretical frame that will be used for studying the discussion of media and journalism is critical institutionalism (Svensson 2015). The basic idea of this approach is to make use of concepts from three domains of social and cultural theory: theories about critique/criticism, theories about institutions, and theories about media and communication. To study discussion of media and journalism through the lens of critical institutionalism entails three things: (1) a focus on the institutions under study—their formation, change, and (possible) evaporation; (2) a focus on the role of critique and criticism in the process that is under study; and (3) the study of how this is mediated. The study of discussion on “old media in new media” would have to uncover what kind of institutions we have at hand and how critique and criticism have or may have an impact on them. Finally the question of how this is mediated and what the role of media and communication is would have to be asked.

The intention of the chapter is not to find a conclusive definition of how to draw the line between media criticism and journalism hate, instead it wants to contribute to an ongoing discussion and reflection on these terms and how they are understood in a social setting. The studied case, the social media discussion forum, addresses and interprets how users in discussions about media and journalism contest them in different ways. The case does not claim to be representative of all kinds of discussions of media and journalism on this forum or in social media in general, for obvious reasons. But what it claims is to systematically investigate a highly specific kind of situation where a journalist enters into dialogue with those criticizing media, journalism, and journalists with an intention to listen to them,

communicate with them, and maybe understand their critique. How can such a social event be analyzed and what can be learnt from it?

### ***Social Media and Politics, Participation, and Expressive Communication***

Social media has many uses and potentials and one of them is its impact in and on politics. The study of political communication and social media is developing into a major area of political communication (Bruns et al. 2015). Research on social media and politics has often focused on the deliberative qualities of communication (Wright et al. 2015). First in terms of how they make possible spaces specifically designed for political discussion and deliberation. These can be social forums where general or specific political issues are being discussed. When such discussions are connected to elections and political campaigns, there has been a strong interest in studying how they relate to the political campaigns, the media agenda, and the outcomes of the election (Bruns et al. 2015). Secondly, social media can also be used as a tool of political deliberation implicitly (Graham 2012). Many discussions can have a political relevance and a political dimension, even if they are not framed as a political discussion. Fan forums (Graham and Hajru 2011) or economic consultation forums (Graham and Wright 2014) are examples of nonpolitical sites that offer a place and space for political deliberation. Social media may also create a third space—between work and home—where people meet and talk/write about common issues without identifying it as a political setting (Wright et al. 2015). This study is an example of a discussion with political relevance, but not a part of a political campaign or process.

A second theme in the study of social media is how it opens up for new voices and actors in the discussion and how it empowers users (Shirky 2009). The discussion site Flashback can be seen as an example of this kind of openness and empowerment of the users. Data from empirical studies are still inconclusive if social media exclusively has this empowering capacity for the individual users or if it rather empowers organized and powerful collective actors (Fuchs 2014). The case might be that it empowers both individual (Volkmer 2014) and collective actors (Couldry 2012) in different forms of network structures and practices.

A third theme, relevant for this study, is how social media becomes an arena for contestation through critique and activism. When new voices and actors have access to media and can express their views, they will use it for giving voice to their critique. It can also be used for distributing views, gaining support for them, mobilizing people, and carrying out actions. Contestation rather than consensus is the approach used for this (Dahlberg 2007). Alternative views on society and the media are often connected to an emancipatory view of individual and collective change and development (Habermas 1972). The last decade have witnessed a proliferation of alternative groups and views getting access to and being

represented on social media in Western countries. The political agenda is anti-establishment and, in many cases, anti-democratic and may be expressed from a rightist, leftist, or a religious perspective. Social media discussion forums can develop into hotbeds for this kind of radically contestative communities, or counter-publics (Cammaerts 2009) and studies of how competing alternative groups use social media are now emerging (Neumayer 2016). The study of such counter-publics and nationalist/racist ideologies linked to them is an emerging research field, and this chapter contributes also to that field of research.

Lately a fourth theme has emerged strongly in the Nordic studies of social media focusing on the intensity and character of communication carried out (Mölster 2015). Offense, hate, threat, harassment, and stalking are terms used to describe how social media users are communicating with each other. The line between words and fighting words are being investigated and freedom of speech is waged against privacy, personal integrity, and human dignity. Discussions of media, journalism, and journalists are also carried out in this heated register of communication (Wadbring and Mölster 2015). In this sense, social media forums establish a mediated space for the expression of hate towards the media, but especially hate of journalists and specific journalists that are powerful in mainstream media - often with focus on female journalists and editors.

Within the context of a highly volatile media sphere, comprising the old and new media with their institutions and actors, this chapter studies how discussion of net hate and the role of media and journalism in and for that hate triggers a description and critique of media and journalism. The discussion forum and the thread catalyze the expression of a profound distrust of the mainstream media in Sweden and the journalists working there. Within this horizon of expectations, a journalist enters the forum to talk about media and journalism. This attempt and this event can be seen as an example of communicative criticism (Fornäs 2013), a form of media criticism that intervenes with the intention of creating understanding and to coordinate action (Habermas 1984, 1987).

### *A New Era for Media Criticism*

Media criticism has a long history and runs parallel to the use of different kinds of media (Jagmohan and Bounds 2008). Writing, printing, mass media, electronic media, and digital media have emerged along with critique and criticism. Part of that critique has also been radical, arguing for a fundamental change of how media is set up, owned, and used (Berry and Theobald 2006). In the nineteenth century a criticism of the popular press emerged in the USA, laying the ground for much of the more modern criticism of the media to follow (Marzolf 1991). With the emergence of radio and TV, especially television, criticism developed during the first and middle part of the twentieth century (Rixon 2011). The digital transformation of the last three decades also calls for a revitalization of media criticism.

Digitalization of media has created new opportunities for the communication between media and its environment. Newspapers, radio, and television are now situated in a digital media landscape where they are connected to their sources, competitors, and users. Being present on the same platform and connected to old and new stakeholders has established a new predicament for media and journalism, as networked media and networked journalism (Heinrich 2010). The parallel developments of social media and the organizational use of digital media have strengthened this connectedness between old media and new media and between journalism and a world of organizations, groups, and individual users of the media.

Social network media, such as Facebook and Twitter, have emerged as major sites for comment and discussion of media and journalism. Major media also outsource their comment sections to social media actors like Facebook, such as the biggest Swedish news provider on the net Aftonbladet. All kinds of organizations link up to these major media networks, integrating social media, professional media, and organizations in new ways. Specific forums for sharing of information, for comment and communication, and for discussion and debate, like Reddit, also flourish, establishing new spaces for communication on media and journalism. In Sweden the social discussion forum Flashback is a major example of a more enclosed discussion site. This enclosure is an instrument for fencing off and developing a common ground for discussions. The idea of dissent and dissidence is relevant for this type of discussion forum. This is a sphere of communication that certainly is not publicly shared, even if it is publicly accessible.

In the era of digital and social media where boundaries between producers and users of media collapse, new actors can emerge as producers of media and also as critics of the media. A Swedish critic and philosophy scholar has proclaimed that “Everyone is a critic” in an analysis of cultural criticism of today, still formulating very general criteria for how such criticism should be carried out (Anderberg 2009). That users of the media also enter as producers and creators of content is an important aspect in this new landscape of social and digital media (Keen 2007; Bruns 2008).

The digital media landscape offers a myriad of possibilities for media comment, debate, and criticism. In a comparative study of media accountability in European countries, Fengler et al. (2014) show that media criticism on the Internet and digital media makes a strong contribution to the discussion of journalism in most European countries. Old instruments of criticism are complemented by new digital instrument of criticism and accountability (Heikkilä et al. 2014).

The conclusion to be drawn is that we have entered into a new era of media criticism. Criticism and critique of the media will and can no longer be neglected, neither by the media themselves nor by the academics studying these media (Svensson 2015).

## ***Analyzing Media Criticism/Critique as Process, in Relation to Accountability and in Social Setting***

In this chapter a specific model of media criticism/critique will be used. It is a model that focuses on the analysis of three dimensions of criticism/critique (Svensson 2015). First, an analysis of the intentions of the critic is carried out and if the criticism/critique is communicative, strategic, or instrumental. Secondly, the object of criticism/critique is analyzed by specifying, for instance, what kind of technology, organization, or cultural form is being criticized. Thirdly, by mapping the meaningful texts and actions, analyzing the communication process that they are part of and investigating how actors relate to this process. Together these three dimensions define what kind of critique is expressed in a media text (or action) that is critical, and the communication process that it becomes part of. A term that sums up all the three parts—how the criticism and critique is formulated and expressed, how it is communicated in a process, and how actors relate to this expression and process—is *criticality*.

Lately, many scholars have studied media criticism as part of accountability processes (Eberwein et al. 2011; Fengler et al. 2014; Groenhart 2013). In these studies criticism is seen as an integrated part of accountability processes, contributing to the establishment of accountability cultures. In this approach accountability cultures cover both how media producers and users deal with critique and how they deal with issues of responsibility and accountability. These studies put too much focus on being and holding someone accountable and too little focus on being critical and delivering criticism (Svensson 2015). The relation between criticism and accountability should be approached giving more independence to criticism and critique. Cultures are discernible not only around accountability, but also around critique and criticism. Description and analysis of the relations between cultures of critique and accountability can deepen our understanding of media criticism (Svensson 2015). It is not only useful when analyzing critique in legacy media, but should also be useful for analyzing critique and accountability in new media of the digital media landscape.

On a more general social level studying how critique is triggered and expressed in a social media discussion forum can be done as a study of institutionalized processes and structures. To study the outcome of the process, the role of critique and criticism should be considered. Between institutions and critique there is mediation and it also needs to be addressed. In this case study the objects of critique are institutions of media and journalism. The critique is the ideas, images, narratives, and discourses that are being communicated and the mediation is the thread inside the social media discussion forum Flashback in its relevant communication context: the Swedish and global media system.

This sums up the conceptual ideas and theoretical frame behind this chapter and the analysis of the discussion thread on the Swedish discussion forum.



## The Case, Background, Material and Method

Flashback is a Swedish social media discussion forum that has around 1 million members (994,804 in November 2015) responsible for more than 50 million posts. It was established in 1996 and to evade Swedish legislation it is registered in the USA. Flashback describes itself as a haven for freedom of speech, “Freedom of Speech. For real,” as they brand themselves, and especially cater for dissenting ideas that are at the limits of accepted freedom of speech in Sweden.

Flashback offers a news service, but the main part of their activity is the discussion forum. Under the category Culture they have the subcategory Media and Journalism where nearly 16,000 discussion threads are available. The subcategory started in 2009 and has been active since then.

One discussion thread from the Swedish discussion forum Flashback was chosen for closer analysis. It was selected from discussion threads that focus on journalism in the category “Culture” and its subcategory “Media and Journalism” on the forum.

The main selection criterion was theoretical. It was chosen to study how dialogue may be achieved through forum discussion. In this case, the intention of the creator/starter of the thread was to get in contact with users of the social forum and discuss issues of hate on the net (näthat) and hate against journalists, but it also covered discussion of general issues of media and journalism.

The thread developed from 19 February to 10 August 2013. It contains 1150 posts and was viewed 129,683 times. Almost all of the posts are published between 19 February and 28 February. This thread is comparatively huge and has been shared by many.

The thread was created after the publication of an opinion piece on the digital discussion site Newsmill. The author, a female Stockholm based freelance journalist, published the article “When the power (net)contempt the citizens” (Newsmill 17/2 2013). In this article she describes a failed attempt of communication between a journalist from an established mainstream newspaper and a net forum to discuss what hate on the net is and how the users of the forum perceive and relate to hate. That article was published in Göteborgs Posten in early 2013. The journalist acted mainly as an observer in the forum and this is mentioned in the opinion piece. According to the author of the opinion piece the journalist had a condescending attitude towards the forum members and the resulting article became a biased story about we/the good (journalists) and they/the bad (forum members/social media users). The author can partially identify with the subordinate position of the forum members and in her article she tries to understand and explain the harsh expressions and the tone used. But she also does something beyond that. She decides to enter into a discussion with the forum members and users. Since the forum where the opinion piece is published does not allow comments any longer, she decides to start a discussion thread on Flashback in the subcategory Media and Journalism. In the first post six questions about net hate, media, journalism, politics, and freedom of speech are asked. During ten days this develops into a thread with more than 1100

posts and where the thread starter take a central role, being the only one who is not acting anonymously. During this discussion another opinion piece is published on Newsmill, criticizing the freelance journalist and her attempts to talk to the “net haters.”

The thread has been analyzed using qualitative text analysis and all posts of the thread have been analyzed. The coding was done using seven thematic categories: intention, critical object, approach towards criticism and hate, accountability, social relations, comments on the discussion process, and, finally, comments on immigration, migration, and refugees. Since the thread consisted of more than 1000 posts, focus was placed on essential moves or changes in the discussion as it developed over time. Selection of specific posts for closer analysis was done using the general understanding of the thread. The thread initiator is also in focus in the analysis, since the intentions expressed in the initial posts are of high relevance for the aim of the study.

## **Analysis**

### ***Overview of the Analysis***

The analysis of the discussion thread starts with the intentions expressed by the participants, then the objects of critique are examined, and finally the discussion process is analyzed. The process is studied from four aspects: (1) the users approach towards criticism and hate; (2) the process phases; (3) the process relations; and (4) the users approach towards accountability. The analysis section then relates approaches towards criticism and accountability.

### ***The Intentions***

The thread starter (TS) presents the intentions in the first post, a post that consist of the six questions and a short presentation of the background to the article and the involvement with Flashback. Most comments were sent as e-mails and one of the mailing readers suggested that the discussion should be moved to Flashback:

He suggested that I should open a thread here on Flashback so that we all could discuss the ideas of the article. Now I am doing that. . .

- What is your experience of “the power” in the form of journalists or politicians in relation to us citizens? What would you like to change?
- What is your experience of Flashback as a Forum—too permissive or just OK?
- What is your experience of the public discussion—is it characterized by aggressive contradictions and polemics or is this description exaggerated?
- What is actually meant by freedom of speech for you—to say whatever you want to whomever you want and with any words you want?

- Who do you think “configures” the basic values of today’s society, and is this important for democracy or not?
- And last, but not least: what do you think that I forgot to address in my article?

...

Warm greeting from XX [thread starter], freelance journalist (whose presence in this forum is not with a mission to do research, but to discuss with others.) [Own translation] (FB post #1, 130219)

The question of honesty is vital for the discussion to take off, since the article discussed a case of journalistic abuse of trust. The thread starter claims to have another agenda, which is proven by her opinion piece and the ambition to get feedback from the forum users and not to do journalistic research.

One of the approaches that she uses in the process is that of showing and asking, not educating. With a background as freelance journalist in the area of education the thread starter does not want to interfere with the views of the other participants, just tap into them. Another dimension is also politeness and the combinations of politeness, an openly declared ambition to listen to the forum users’ view and the idea of asking rather than teaching paves the way for the acceptance in the forum.

The trust of the forum users is quickly established, since many of them approve of the article and the ideas.

Very good article. Glad that you dare stand for what you believe in!...Thanks! ! (FB #3, 130219)

Since they support the ideas they also come to appreciate this example of journalism and the TS as a journalist that goes against the grain, but already during the second day doubts about the intentions of the TS are raised:

When comes the article ”The net hate on Flashback, my two weeks as public debater.”? (FB #104, 130220)

Have not read the article. But it is too much of backslapping for me to be able to take the comments seriously. Feels more like people are polishing their facade if their comments should be published in a newspaper or that they would be offered to do an interview. I see no true views but only a lot of drivel and fake like behavior. Ugh. (FB #157, 130220)

The initial trust established is also challenged later in the process. A short conversation in the latter part of the thread still airs these doubts:

I might be a bit paranoid, but think if XX [the thread starter] is trying to infiltrate here, finds out discussants identities. You should be careful. (FB #738 13024)

Don’t think so. She seems just and honest, characteristics that are not so common among journalists nowadays. (FB #739 13024)

I agree. Also thinks she is honest. On the other side, if I wanted to infiltrate I would do just the same. I have not heard of XX [the thread starter] before the Newsmill article. Should be very careful in the contacts with such an untried name. (FB #740 13024)

In the final part of the thread the thread starter announces that she will not publish an article or a book. The book is already written and published—on the forum site (FB # 1097, 130228).

Three general reactions towards the intentions of the thread starter were discernible in the material studied. The first reaction focuses on inclusion, visibility, and establishing a respectful attitude towards the journalist. Forum users want to be seen, heard, and respected for what they stand for, and in this case they find a journalist that does not dismiss their ideas:

I appreciate that you take the time to post here. You have already proved that you are better than most journalists, since the task is to listen and monitor, not to censure and train. (FB #63, 130219)

They do not want to win her over to “their” side but want to engage in a debate where their views are included, in contrast to mainstream media where they claim that their views are excluded—through filtering or censoring. In this case there is mutual understanding, but no negotiation of positions.

The second reaction is more interventionist and these forum users want to influence the thread starter to accept values and forms of discussion prevalent in the social forum. They also contest the openness of the thread starter and claim that she has an agenda to foster just her own values—not being open for the opinions expressed in the thread.

...your reaction is significant. If you only can listen to your own premises, if you want to set the tone for the discussion to even be able to understand another perspective you are not ready to hear the truth. (FB # 802, 130225)

The forum represents an alternative way of communication, besides the mainstream media. The limits of what can be said and how it is communicated should be changed and the online forum norms should be internalized. In this reaction there is mutual understanding and, a possible, negotiation of positions. One of the users summarizes:

That we in a short time should be able to convert a socialist, feminist and multiculturalist could not be expected, even with the best arguments. [ . . . ] To reconsider a world-view in public when the social and professional price can be high, had really been to take the thread to a new level. But the important was not that the discussion led to a concrete consensus, but that the discussion even took place. That is beautiful enough, great enough in Sweden of today. (FB #1127, 130228)

The third reaction is expressed by a few users who claim that there is no ground for reaching out or achieving understanding. This reaction focuses on contradiction and antagonism and there is no room for negotiation when it comes to mainstream media and journalists.

You seem to have woken up and are speaking out, advocating pluralism of opinions rather than against it. Good so, being a journalist, with all that it entails as system loyalty and PC-sapience by default. It is kind of cute, bonus for that. But at this stage it is too late to come dragging with dashing drivel about “Bamse” [Swedish comic magazine figure] and “humanism.” It is war. (FB # 501, 130221)

The reaction is also connected to a political ideology stressing either nationalist, racist, radical democratic, or individualist political agendas, none of the centrist

political ideas. In this case there is weak or no understanding and no negotiation of positions.

What is the outcome of the discussion in terms of intentions and how can it be analyzed in terms of instrumental/strategic versus communicative intentions? The outcome of the thread is mixed in this respect. The first reaction is an expression of communicative intentions, including more users in the communication. The second reaction has a potential for understanding, but the thread also shows several examples of doubt and distrust. The third reaction displayed no intention towards understanding. The thread contains both attempts towards negotiated understanding and claims for sustained antagonism, and therefore displays a multiplicity of intentional logics.

### *The Object of Critique/Criticism*

Many of the posts express a profound aversion towards mainstream media and journalism. One of the discourses developed is that of media and journalism as part of the power structures of society and in that capacity filtering or censoring information, ideas, and debate from the public arena. This experience is often expressed in a highly emotional way:

There is nothing I hate more in Sweden of today than the political and media establishment. (FB #5, 130219)

Honestly speaking I don't feel even one ounce of respect for either journalists or politicians. (FB #112, 130220)

I have basically quit following Swedish media, since it has degenerated to mainly feed people with opinions...I see no societal dialogue. I see a political and media elite that dictates the opinions for a more and more uninterested public. Those few that bother to oppose are yelling louder and louder to be heard. (FB #211, 130220)

The bias and supposed filtering is also seen as a major reason why many of the forum participants dislike the media—that they have the experience of being excluded from public discussion in mainstream media:

...you know that it is read by and have an impact on so many and that me or anyone else will not have a CHANCE to argue for another view (Believe me, I have tried, but as an ordinary person you don't have a chance if you have a dissenting opinion). (FB #225, 130220)

In short: in "PC" mass media the need to obscure and demonize the enemy, "them", is more important than anything else. (FB #222, 130220)

Journalists are described as part of an elite that has lost contact with the people. On the one hand they can be seen as controlled by other power elites and on the other hand as developing interests of their own. In both cases the result is a rift between journalists and the media users/citizens:

Journalists today are for me just a part of the political elite class. They still pretend as if they were part of and a voice of the people. But behind the doors is hidden an enormous contempt of the people and a bullying against the middle and under class of Sweden. (FB #19, 130219)

Another person is summarizing part of the discussion:

I strongly dislike the way old-time media [gammelmedia] always tells me what to think. It is connected to earlier posts writing about journalists looking down on dissenting thoughts and believing that they know more. They believe that they are so damned cultured and should educate Sweden. In reality it is them that do not have the brains to write objectively. They have totally forgotten what their profession is about. (FB #155, 130220)

Shortcomings of journalists are in focus, rather than the institution of journalism. The media is often defined in terms of the journalists doing the job—not in terms of the owners, managers, or sources and their roles in shaping the media.

There is no clear line drawn between what is critique and hate in the thread, but two approaches stand out: the difference between what you say and how you say it. The first view sees critique as the more rational and factual way of arguing or discussing, whereas hate also contains emotional and affective components. The difference between critique and hate here is located in the way you express it, offering a continuum between them. The second view found in the material is that hate is to be found in the ideas themselves, rather than the way they are expressed. It is the ideas and words, and the intentions behind, which are hateful. Several of the members saw a more obvious dividing line between hate and threat:

The second issue is how you actually argue when you confound comments on published article and social forum discussions with outright persecution and harassment that is sent through completely different channels. How are they connected? (FB #93, 130219)

You should of course be allowed to say almost anything to anyone. (within certain limits, of course, threats are not OK for instance. Contempt and hate can be mediated in a lot of ways, also with fine words. To ban bad language would mean excluding people that have not chosen to educate themselves in speech/writing. (FB #211, 130220)

The interpretation of and reaction to what is said and how it is said is, of course, also of relevance for the distinction between critique and hate. This is also relevant for further analysis of how approaches towards critique and accountability matters for the outcome of the process.

### ***The Process: Critique, Phases, Relations, and Accountability***

The process will be analyzed in four steps. In the first step we analyze what the members have to say about critique and criticism. How do they perceive and express critique of media and journalism and what are their opinions in general on how critique/criticism is related to hate and threat? The second step is an analysis of how the thread developed over time and the phases of the thread. In the third step the social relations developed inside and outside the thread are

analyzed. How do the thread starter and the users relate to other journalists and what kind of relations develop between users in the thread? The final step will be an analysis of how the members address issues of responsibility and accountability in relations to journalism and media.

### **The Process: Critique**

The approaches towards strong critique and hatred of media and journalists on the net are expressed in three basic ways in the studied material: connected to the media technology; connected to how communication is carried out; and connected to filtering of communication content. Digitalization, norms of communication, and freedom of speech are the three main issues that are addressed in these different approaches.

A first approach is to claim that hate expressed over the net is a media phenomenon, connected to digital media and the Internet where ephemeral communication modes that were accepted in private settings now are fixed and made public on the Internet. The problem is not people, but the technology of the net.

The net hate you describe is more about the nature of the Internet than real hate or contempt. People are plainly anonymous and tend to express themselves rudely. Then you do as you have always done, ignore the trolls. You could almost call it “common sense.” (FB #121, 130219)

A second approach is to say that the Internet affords people to be direct and harsh in their comment because of different inhibition factors linked to digital media, but this also means that it basically is the way something is expressed that is seen as the problem. The problem is not the technology of the net, but the way people use it.

The Internet makes it possible for all people to express their views and that includes less premeditated ones, or comments posted on a Saturday night after a visit to the pub. Nothing to be done. (FB #44, 130219)

...you have not received one single non-constructive post, except the attack “PC-big shot”, this shows that net hate have nothing to do with the opinions expressed, but how you express them... (FB #65, 130219)

For a newcomer the tone of the forum might seem too direct and challenging, but spending time on the forum could mean that the user adapts and comes to see it as acceptable. This indicates that a process of normalization might take place, where otherwise unacceptable demeanor would come to be accepted.

As third approach takes a more political interpretation and claims that hatred on the net is a consequence of being excluded from public participation and here media and journalists have essential roles. Mainstream media and journalists with editorial power filter or block views and information that is not consensual and this creates a reaction that comes to be interpreted by media and journalist themselves as “net hate” or “journalism hate.”

Along with the consensus of opinion people that are not given a voice become more extreme and brutalized, much of this is to blame mass media and then they speak of it as net hate. (FB #27, 130219)

The debate in the comment fields is VERY biased. A significant amount, most certainly the majority, that are erased are not hate but critique, often articulate and supported by facts. (FB #38, 130219)

Internet affordances, the way social media is used, or the filtering of the discussion by the media are the three approaches towards strong critique and hate that are found in the material. In the thread a discussion on the definition of “net hate” also develops, but that will have to be studied more closely in another paper.

### **The Process: Phases**

The process in the thread develops in three phases. In the first phase the discussion is focused on the six questions that the thread starter want to discuss. Several posts give an answer to all of the questions, but most posts choose to focus on one or a couple of them. By asking these six questions the thread starter frames the thread, but it is also evident that the thread starter is at the steering wheel of the thread. In the first third of the thread the thread starter enters into dialogue with most of the forum members. The second day the thread starter is busy working and feedback is given with delay. The thread starter is fully engaged until the end of the thread, answering almost all of the questions directed to her.

Already from the beginning of the thread the intentions of the thread starters was contested. In several posts questions were asked if this really was a case of someone wanting to discuss and understand the forum and its members, or if it was just another covert operation of a journalist wanting to expose the forum and its members as nonrational, net-hating, anti-democrats. Since most of the members were so supportive of the opinion piece - it expressed “their” view and they were impressed that a journalist could hold this opinion - the thread starter gained support and through this also trust in the community of the forum thread. The initial distrust resurfaced in the middle part of the thread and the person behind the article came into focus asking questions like: Who is she, actually? What are her intentions? Can we really trust her? Other members supported the journalist, advising on how to act in the forum to be able to be trusted.

In the third phase the debate increasingly goes off topic, addressing populist political issues. The discussion meanders into topics well known in the forum: migration, integration, racism, and Swedish welfare politics. Strong and provocative views also emerge - e.g., anti-Semitism and media ownership are addressed. In this phase the thread starter announces that the discussion has come to an end. Options for starting other threads are also considered by the thread starter and members.



### **The Process: Relations**

The social relations developed through the thread can be analyzed in terms of the internal and external relations established. How are relations between forum members expressed and developed and how are relations to persons outside of the thread described and assessed?

The journalist starting the thread generally develops a good relation to forum members. This journalist is seen as different, expressing sound ideas that find resonance in the forum environment. The interpretation is that this is a journalist of a specific kind. During the process the identity of the journalist is ambiguous. On the one hand the journalist has specific qualities and views that attract the forum members, on the other hand this is a journalist and for that reason could and should not be trusted. As a representative of journalism and journalists this creates tensions in the relation with forum members. The journalist also develops closer relations to some of the forum members. On the one hand members that share the same opinions and on the other hand members who want to win her over as a permanent forum member.

During the thread the journalist shows some disappointment that no external support is offered. There are no other journalists entering the thread for the sake of discussing the issue and broadening the spectrum of participants. The journalist also expresses a bit of disappointment that the discussion is not spread in other media. In a reflective post there is a suggestion that the issue and the thread might be of wider interest:

Honestly, I think it is a shame that not more people with greater knowledge and experience and, above all, a burning interest for the issue, are [not] taking part in the discussion. Without hiding behind anonymous user names. But while we are waiting for all researchers, experts, niche journalist and human right organizations to throw themselves into the debate you might be able to contribute with your knowledge? (FB #872, 130226)

### **The Process: Responsibility and Accountability**

Issues of media responsibility and accountability are not addressed with the same kind of frequency as issues of critique. Though, one of the participants points out that journalist responsibility is closely connected to their power position:

They are extremely privileged to have such a platform to express their opinions on and, not the least, to affect others. With this follows a responsibility that is hard to understand for some; meaning that what is said from this position impacts much harder than anything that an "ordinary citizen" express from a comment field. (FB #36, 130219)

This powerful position also requires that the comments and reactions from users and readers are addressed. Media and journalist are being accused of failing to take responsibility for this dialogue:

It is a quite basic pedagogy and leadership that if I say something, then I have a responsibility and an obligation to address the reactions [...]. Those who, in their profession,

cannot manage and respond to reactions on their opinions and knowledge should not continue that profession. As long as journalists don't learn to manage and use the Internet in a constructive and competent way, they are like incompetent tyrants that generate brutal fractions of resistance. Finally, it explodes in a reaction where people are forced to escalate their brutality to drown out others and to get any response. (FB #127, 130220)

As a remedy a more listening attitude among journalists is suggested:

Respond to other people, as you want to be responded to, if you are too important and do not have time, avoid it completely. Most people that are upset calm down if they get a decent response. (FB #127, 130220)

Analyzing how accountability is addressed, the issue of anonymity also becomes an important aspect to study. Many of the forum members see anonymity as integral to freedom of speech giving the possibility to express ideas they otherwise would be sanctioned for - at work or in everyday life. Flashback and the discussion forum is a place where otherwise excluded ideas are expressed. This exemplifies how closely connected anonymity and accountability are, without identification holding to account is not possible. Forum members also invoke positive deliberative ideas connected to anonymity - e.g., that the force of the argument is in focus, that authority is minimized and the open character of the discussion thread.

The communication situation offers a fundamental inequality in the relation between the thread starter and the other forum members. The thread starter is the only one who is identified with an authentic name, though the image used by the thread starter is that of journalist Günter Wallraff. During the thread the thread starter reports on a couple of personal conversations with forum members outside of the publicity of the thread and in the thread the issue of anonymity develops in the latter part of thread. The experience from this thread makes the journalist draw the conclusion that anonymity would be preferred. Being anonymous is also recommended by a member as a way of learning the discussion forum better through lurking and participation in different groups.

Issues of responsibility and accountability are covered in the discussion but are not at the forefront. Its major impact can be seen in posts expressing ideas on how to interpret or take action against strong criticism of and hateful expressions aimed towards journalists. The question of anonymity also connects with accountability and the possible consequences of using the freedom of speech fully.

### ***Comparing Critique and Accountability***

The thread offered easy access to the analysis of objects of critique and the approach towards net hate and hateful expressions towards journalists. The second and third approaches towards net hate are the most relevant for the comparison between critique and accountability. The second approach focused on the way someone made use of the net and the third approach focused on the content of the

information disseminated or discussed and how media and journalists filter and censor specific kinds of content.

Thread participants are actively trying to persuade the journalist to change norms of proper conduct in forum discussions. This is an example of how influence has the direction from the forum members to the forum guest - the journalist. Instead of holding members accountable for their ways of communicating or advocating change of behavior they are accepted. Several posts in the thread also make the point that this thread is a good example of how an otherwise contested issue - female journalist with leftist and multicultural ideas - is dealt with in a respectful way. There are some posts that signal and designate themselves as “net hate,” so this kind of post is a part of the thread, but they are not the dominant ones. Summing up the thread, both the journalist and most of the participants agree upon that the thread had been respectful and to the point.

The major interpretation of net hate - generally and towards journalists - in the thread is that it is a consequence of disrespectful attitudes and exclusion. This is also why the opinion piece made such an impact in the forum, since it was advocating this idea in a more public discussion forum connected to mainstream media. This interpretation also lends support to the second approach towards strong expressions of critique - that it is mainly a question of how you communicate, not what you communicate about, that is offensive and might transgress established norms.

The third approach claiming that critique that goes beyond or is outside of accepted values or norms can be connected to accountability in a paradoxical way. According to this discourse access to and freedom of speech in the mainstream media is only for the “us” and not for “them”, excluding all kinds of non-conformative or conflict-oriented views. In the nationalist and anti-democratic variant of this discourse this situation will change in a chiliastic reversal. With political change, freedom for the oppositional and alternative ideas will turn earlier consensus into heresy and those who were excluded would now be in a position to exclude. This scenario shows a possible but not necessary connection between the present situation of subalternity and exclusion turning into a future situation of dominance, excluding earlier “oppressors.”

## **Conclusions and Discussion**

Analyzing intentions, objects of critique, and the process is a promising way of studying debate of media and journalism. In this small case study the relevance of studying intentions was highlighted. The intention and the response to the intention of the thread starter were of major importance for the outcome of the thread discussion. It was also noted that intentional logics or motives were mixed and the study gives no clear evidence that a deliberative or agonist approach dominate the discussion thread under study.

The discussion thread was not focused on media criticism or critique of journalism/individual journalists, but on the role of the media and journalists in fostering hatred on the net. Still, it was full of critical remarks, distancing and distrust of mainstream media and its representatives - its owners, editors, and journalists. The issue, net hate, and the place, a thread on the social media discussion forum Flashback, enabled the participants to enact a civic space that took a distance towards mainstream media and established politics.

### ***The Process***

Three approaches towards net hate were identified - the media centered, the expression centered, and the content/editorial centered. The process was to a large extent moderated by the continuous feedback from the thread starter. In the process the motives and authenticity of the thread starter was contested, but eventually accepted. Internal relations between the journalist and the other thread participants were ambivalent, oscillating between an acceptance of a "specific kind of journalist" and rejection of "just another journalist." Externally the thread did not succeed to build social relations to journalists outside the thread. It was spread neither on other social media nor in mainstream media. To this day it has stayed a hidden gem of communicative critique.

Issues of accountability were not in focus on the thread, even if suggestions for action against net hatred was presented and commented. The analysis shows that the balance between critique and accountability needs to be further problematized. The thread offered a lot of relevant material on critique, but less so on responsibility and accountability. The issue of anonymity and the consequences of participating with your real identity caused reflections about accountability and anonymity. Anonymity seems to breed critique, but also transgression into hate and threat. Conflicts and tensions between specific ways of approaching critique and accountability need to be mapped and analyzed further.

### ***What Kind of Civic Space?***

What kind of civic space does this discussion thread establish? This depends on the perspective you have when looking at the discussion - the insider, the outsider, or the bystander. For the insider the forum and the thread represent a dissident civic space, a space where otherwise excluded ideas are being expressed and circulated. For the outsider the forum would probably represent radical or even extremist ideas, since many of the users advocate radical political ideas and some anti-democratic ideas. This is also the public image of Flashback that many of the members are critical of.

In the attempt to talk and listen to the forum members the journalist was successful. Even if the thread did not spread it was in itself a successful endeavor and it is a source for fruitful discussions of media and journalism and the role of them for hate on the net. Earlier in this chapter the thread was described as mixed in terms of its intentional logics - both deliberative and agonistic. The attempt from the journalist was to make forum participants more deliberative and the attempt from many of the participant was to make the journalist more agonistic. This ambiguity paves the way for analyzing the thread as a liminal civic space - a space in-between the acceptable and the unacceptable where negotiation and struggle takes place.

### *The Case Through the Lens of Critical Institutionalism*

The institutions of media and journalism are changing quickly. In the discussion thread the role and responsibility of media and journalism for hatred on the net was discussed. The backdrop is the changing media landscape and its spaces of emerging digital media. The institutional change, cumulative, discreet or disruptive, feed into the evolving medias - analogue and digital. In this new setting the journalist role is configured in new ways opening up the division between the media organization and the journalist in several ways.

The thread gave room for a broad and diverse discussion on media and journalism. Several of the members made a point that the discussion had few examples of “net hate” in the thread. There were outburst of that, and some ironic uses of it, but the thread managed to keep up a discussion of media and journalists that was critical rather than hateful. The thread also gave proof of different approaches towards media and journalism criticism. This case is not a clear case of either conflict or consensus, rather it offers a complex mix of them and what stands out is the obvious contradiction between the thread starters intention to understand and some of the members refusal to listen.

The discussion is mediated through a social media forum discussion thread - a communication event spanning a couple of days and a limited amount of participants. This thread is part of a themed discussion area where issues of media and journalism are addressed. The position of the site and its services can be viewed as marginal from the perspective of mainstream media, but according to the members and participant it is the mainstream media that is the margin. The thread, with the ambition of understanding and to develop communicative criticism, is an interesting and relevant contribution to overcoming polarizations in the digital media landscape. Even if the thread starter to some extent “went native” and if there were those who dissented the presence of a journalist in the forum, the overall contribution was to push the contestation over media and journalism a bit towards understanding rather than antagonism.

## *Final Comments*

This study investigates critique of media and journalism as part of a wider issue and the discourses around it - hate speech and threat/harassment on the net. Journalists and media are involved in these issues as a group of receivers of hate and threat/harassment posts and as actors in or arena for these communication processes. Media and journalism may also have a part in the development of hate speech and threat/harassment on the net and their responsibilities for the situation and actions that might follow from that was discussed in the thread.

The case illustrates how journalists, journalism, and media are addressed when issues of net hate are discussed in a Swedish social media setting. The discussion thread can be interpreted as an intervention to find out ways that journalists and media can be motivated to listen, understand, and maybe change based on critique that is often radically out of their comfort zone.

The chapter also contributes to the development of a more encompassing and systematic analysis of how journalism and media is publicly discussed in digital media. The case analyzed is about online hate, but the model may be used for other cases and settings, displaying the relevance of media and journalism critique/criticism for understanding the predicaments of our time.

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# Chapter 12

## Lurkers and the Fantasy of Persuasion in an Online Cultural Public Sphere

Jakob Svensson

### Introduction

This chapter revolves around political discussions on the Swedish online LGBTQ community, *Qruiser*. *Qruiser*, affiliated with the affinity portal and publishing house *QX* (Queer Extra), is primarily set up for dating and finding sexual partners. But users may also discuss politics in the community. This chapter focuses on political discussions in the *Qruiser* forum *Politics, Society and the World* (my translation: Politik, Samhälle och Världen). I depart from a belief that participation in political discussions—wherever they may take place—is important for a vital and vivid democracy. In this setting of an online cultural public sphere (a concept I will elaborate on in the next section), the question I seek to answer is what role *lurkers* play for active participants in the forum in their meaning-making practices.

Why study an online community? At least 100 million people participate regularly in online communities today (Kozinets 2011: 10). It is known that participation changes when it migrates to the Internet owing to possibilities of anonymity, automatic archiving and easy access to other communities (Kozinets 2011: 100). It has been claimed that such characteristics democratise participation, making participation—in the form of expression of opinions and political mobilisation—more accessible for a wider range of the population (Shirky 2009). Others have argued that Internet practices merely underline existing power relationships (Morozov 2011). Regardless of where one stands in this debate, there is a need to include online communities not primarily directed towards decision-makers in the study of participation. It has been argued that highly political discussions take place in such arenas (see, for example, Graham 2009; Andersson 2013). Studies of

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political participation in arenas not primarily directed towards decision-makers are often justified with references to theories of cultural participation and a cultural public sphere (Hermes 2006). This chapter will depart from these theoretical assumptions.

Why study an LGTBQ community? Homosexuals were particularly quick to embrace the Internet and its affordance of time-space compression (Gross 2007). LGBTQ youngsters, often feeling geographically and emotionally isolated, turned to the Internet as a somewhat safe space to explore their sexual identities among supportive and like-minded others. Being primarily geared towards dating, a wider range of opinions are expressed than what is usual in more politically oriented communities that may be accused of creating so-called *filter bubbles* (see Pariser 2011). Hence, it is perhaps not surprising that previous studies of Qruiser have found that political discussions were conflictual and dissent-oriented rather than geared towards deliberation and consensus formation (see Svensson 2014). How did active participants make such conflict-oriented participation meaningful? In interviews many referred to an audience of so-called *lurkers*. Active participants seemed to be generally aware that they could not persuade each other with their arguments. Instead, they believed they could impress a largely invisible (and perhaps to some extent, imagined) audience of lurkers with their arguments (Svensson 2015).

In this chapter, I zoom in on this relationship between active participants and lurkers in order to understand the role of lurkers for active participants when making their participation meaningful in the conflictual political discussions on the Qruiser forum. Are lurkers to be understood as an imagined audience or as a fantasy? And how may such a conceptualisation contribute to our understanding of active participants meaning-making practices?

In sum, this study is set in an online cultural public sphere and contributes to the area of cultural participation in general, and research on lurking in particular. The question I seek to answer is what role lurkers have for active participants' meaning-making practices in the Qruiser discussion forum. Data have been gathered using a netnographic methodology, spending time in the forum, observing participation, actively participating myself as well as interviewing active participants. To discuss the empirical data, the concepts of lurking, imagined audience and fantasy will be used. In the following sections I will attend to this in more detail, starting with the research field of cultural participation. After this I will turn to Qruiser, previous research on the platform, and how I collected data there. The method section will be followed by a review of the academic literature on lurking before attending to the concepts of imagined audience and fantasy.

## Cultural Participation

If understanding politics as concerning the organisation of society and our coexistence in it (see Dewey 1927: 110; Arendt 1998/1958: 14–15; Foucault 1994/1988: 412), the exploration of non-normative identities may be understood as important for political participation since it helps us to think reflexively about our life situations, our society and our place in it (McGuigan 2005). Such reasoning situates this study within the area of *cultural participation* (Hermes 2005). It concerns political participation in an online *cultural public sphere*, a site of popular culture becoming a public sphere because it offers images and symbols that evoke emotions and affective investments that constitute reasons for participating politically (see Hermes 2006). In this sense, the area of cultural participation is a critique of Habermas's (1989) more narrow and communicatively oriented norms of participation in the public sphere.

Dahlgren and Alvares's (2013) delineation between engagement and participation, while underlining their mutual interdependence, can be understood from this perspective. According to them, engagement is the *subjective* requirement for participation, a sense of personal involvement in the questions of political life. It is in this sense that Quiser may be understood as a cultural public sphere where political participation and negotiation/exploration of sexual identities intersect. The communicative exploration of online sexual identities may constitute a subjective entry point into political participation, making such participation subjectively meaningful, not the least since affective communication helps us think reflexively about ourselves, our life situations and how to navigate the society in which we find ourselves (see McGuigan 2005).

Within the field of political communication, arguments have been made that it would be wrong to narrowly focus on realms of institutionalised politics (Carpentier 2011a: 39–40; Wright 2012). Non-institutionalised online arenas—not primarily directed towards decision-makers (such as online affinity communities)—may become spaces for political participation (Street 1997; Hermes 2005; van Zoonen 2005). Still, we know little about how Internet users participate in non-explicitly political online communities to discuss politics (Wojcieszak and Mutz 2009: 41). What we do know is that when political participation occurs in such communities it has often been understood as participation taking a political turn without the initial intention to do so. An example is Graham's (2009) study of discussions on docu-soap fan-pages. But cultural participation also concerns specific spaces on larger affinity portals to which politically interested users are directed. Andersson (2013) studied explicitly political discussions in an online community that primarily targets youth with a specific music preference and clothing style. Andersson found vibrant and politically charged debates from a diversity of political positions. It thus seems that confrontation with diverse political opinions is more likely on non-outspokenly political communities [in contrast to those who suggest that online communities contribute to filter bubbles (Pariser 2011)]. The study of Quiser is similar to Andersson's study in that both of our objects of study are explicitly

political but yet are only one small part of a larger community not primarily geared towards politics.

## Setting and Previous Research

So what do we know about Qruiser? Qruiser is, in its own words (see [www.qruiser.com](http://www.qruiser.com), accessed 12 April 2016), the largest online LGBTQ community in Sweden (and in the Nordic region). It is part of the larger affinity portal QX (Queer Extra), which is also an offline monthly paper and publishing house. According to its statistics, Qruiser had 109153 active members at the time of data gathering (November 2012). The majority of the members were between 20 and 40 years old, with an average age of 33. Seventy-two (72) percent of the members are based in Sweden and only 17% defined themselves as in a relationship, underlining Qruiser's dating function. Seventy-two (72) percent defined themselves as gay, lesbian or bisexual and 72% defined themselves as male. In this sense, Qruiser is a gay community (even though as a researcher who interacts with nicknames, I cannot be sure whether a person identifies as an L, G, B, T or Q).

Qruiser is primarily used for flirting, dating, finding friends and sexual partners. The name Qruiser refers to cruising—an activity undertaken by homosexual men (mostly in the pre-digital era and before the general acceptance of homosexuality in the West) strolling around in outdoor areas known as a space (often parks) where they can find other homosexual men by checking each other out, looking for—as well as having—casual sex. Qruiser is not only an online space for cruising. Like any community (see Kozinets 2011), it is used for different purposes, such as interacting with like-minded people, hanging out with friends and establishing social bonds.

On Qruiser, political discussions take place in forums and clubs. A club is a gathering of like-minded people supporting everything from a particular music band, political party, fashion brand, or sexual activity as well as a political party. In the forum members can start as well as discuss (already started) threads on various topics. In this chapter, I focus on discussion threads in the forum Politics, Society & the World. I have spent time on the forum, observed, participated and interviewed participants there.

Previous research on these forum discussion threads has concluded that they were antagonistic (Svensson 2013) and full of trolling and flaming practices and understood as a way for participants to pass time and entertain themselves (Svensson 2015). This style of participation can be connected to the sexuality of participants through the genre of so-called *queer flaming* (see Svensson 2017). Two polarising frames that provided participants with anchoring points for their participation dominated the discussion threads (see Svensson 2014). The first concerned the left versus the right. Since all political parties in the Swedish Parliament embrace LGBTQs to some extent, this frame was largely centred on workers' rights versus facilitating employers to make it cheaper for them to employ. The second

frame concerned xenophobes (especially islamophobes) versus a politically correct multiculturalist elite; in other words, pro or against immigration. This frame can be related to ideas of *homonationalism*. Puar (2007) describes homonationalism as a growing “global gay Islamophobia” (foreword, p. xvi), how Muslims are seen as threats to LGBTQ persons, who in turn embrace (and are embraced by) nationalist agendas. Sexual identity was used to justify positions within these frames, and in this way, personalising their political standpoints (Svensson 2017).

In interviews, participants revealed that the forum was generally conceived as a place free from political correctness, providing an outlet for political frustration. In this context, the participants talked about their participation as a pastime, verbal fighting as a game that entertained them and was fun (Svensson 2015). Interview data also suggests that the participants were generally motivated to debate, to improve debating skills and to impress an audience of lurkers, rather than to understand, agree with or learn from other active participants in the threads. Participants talked about an urge to let people know the truth. While the participants believed themselves to have privileged access to truth (see also Van Zoonen 2012 and Carpentier 2014), they were also mostly aware that they could not convince their opponents. One interviewee stated, “You don’t win over XX in this way; it is about getting *others* to see the flaws in his argumentation”. Hence, participants were not addressing their opponents in their posting practices. The idea of an audience of lurkers instead seems to play an important role for the active participants when making their participation meaningful. One interviewee made this very clear: “I will never get my opponent to change his or her view, and this is not the aim either—the debate is about influencing the undecided, who only follow the debate without participating in it”.

The norm on the forum, thus, is that you do not participate unless you have a solid opinion already formed. It was when I violated this norm I really understood it. In a thread about Israel and Palestine, I posed the question of how to understand and use the term anti-Semitism. I genuinely sought a discussion of the concept and how to use it. This question was understood as a provocation rather than as a genuine quest for discussion. It thus became clear to me that if you have not formed your opinion on a matter, you are expected to lurk the thread until your opinion is formed. This further underlines the importance of lurkers for these participants.

## Method

Before continuing to explore the concept of lurking and how it has been studied, some words on the empirical data and how it has been gathered. The core of the data gathering took place in November 2012 and it was centred on online interviews and observations. Some online interviews are still ongoing. At the very start I adopted a *netnographic* methodology to gather empirical data. Discussion forums are particularly suitable for netnographic research (Kozinets 2011). Netnography is a form of ethnography adapted to online communities’ characteristics. The three main

differences between ethno- and netnography are how researchers (1) enter the culture, (2) collect data and (3) ethical considerations they have to make. The first difference is straightforward; the researcher enters the culture online through the communication platform that the community uses. The second difference—collecting data—is possible through a combination of methods. Three types of data can be collected in netnographic research (Kozinets 2011): (1) archive data (easily selected through copy and paste), (2) elicited data (gathered in interaction with the participants through observations and interviews) and (3) field notations (noted in a reflexive diary, a method that was not used for the data supporting arguments in this chapter).

Participant observation is of particular importance here. Kozinets (2011) argues that all netnographic research builds on fieldwork, i.e. a researcher spending much time in an online community trying to understand members via an embedded cultural understanding and thick description (see Geertz 1973). From 1 to 20 November 2012, I conducted participant observations in all the discussion threads in the forum Politics, Society & the World. I collected archive data by downloading all of these discussion threads and the posts in them until 25 November 2012. This gave me a corpus of 76 different threads started by 31 different nicknames, containing a total of 2853 posts. Kozinets (2011: 139) argues that about 1000 double-spaced pages is a suitable amount of archive data from discussion forums. The 76 discussion threads on Qruiser in November 2012 resulted in about 1700 pages of posts.

In addition, all the thread-starters and recurrent posters were invited to participate in online interviews. In total, I conducted interviews with 36 different nicknames on the platform (through the message service). The interviews differed in length. In total, I have around 250 pages of interview material. This material includes interviews, conducted in Swedish, from a pre-study in April 2012. All the interviews started with me presenting myself, my research, and explaining my interest in their motivations for participating in the discussion threads. Since these interviews continued over a long period, I had the opportunity to adjust my questions to the type of interviewed participant and how they had participated in the discussion threads.

The third difference with offline ethnography concerns ethical issues. Qruiser is neither a public nor a private forum. One needs to be a member to access the site, a process that takes only 2 min. All visitors, also non-members, can view member profile pictures on the login page (see [www.qruiser.com](http://www.qruiser.com)). Despite this easy access and public display of members' profile pictures, it is doubtful that the participants foresaw that their participation would be part of a research project. I was, therefore, totally open on Qruiser about my presence and my research aims, not the least on my profile page (as advised by Kozinets 2011: 201). On 4 November, I changed my nickname to *forskaren* (the researcher). I also contacted the administrators, who gave me permission to conduct research on the forum. I further repeatedly attempted to obtain permission from the publisher, without any success. However, I did check the terms of use and the different policies on Qruiser to ensure that none of them were violated when I conducted my research. All thread-starters were asked

to participate in interviews. Although not all wanted to participate, all those who answered my request gave me permission to study the threads they had started (as advised by Kozinets 2011: 203). In this chapter, no personal information is revealed about any of the participants (such as their nicknames or age). This does not guarantee complete anonymity, but something scholars label “middle masking” (Kozinets 2011: 211). Only interview excerpts are used from participants who gave me permission to do so. Hence, the participants were assured a great deal of confidentiality. Furthermore, the data I collected were from a forum in which some of the participants provided a link to their blogs—showing their names and personal information. In addition, in the forum, people confront each other about their opinions (see the result section) and it can thus be argued that the participants did not act as if the communication were private (for a discussion of this, see Andersson 2013). In conclusion, the risk of harm to the participants is minimal.

In this chapter, I seek to understand the role of lurkers in the active participants’ meaning-making practices. Instead of highlighting the role of (sexual) identity for such meaning-making practices (as I have done elsewhere, see Svensson 2017), the specific focus is on the relationship between active participants and so-called lurkers. To achieve this, I have returned to data gathered in November 2012 and since I have continued sporadic observations, interviews and contacts with seven participants, I have also asked them directly how they conceive of lurkers and their importance for their participation. But what do we know about lurkers and lurking? This I will attend to next.

## Lurkers and Lurking

A lurker is generally defined as someone who uses (visits, reads) an online arena (such as chat room, forums and file-sharing website), but does not contribute to it with any material. As such, lurking is often considered the most widespread online practice (Nielsen 2006). However, little academic research has been devoted to lurking, according to Edelmann (2013: 645). Reviewing definitions and research on lurkers and lurking, she argues for recognising lurking as an important practice and to reconsider the rather negative connotations attached to the practice. Lurking is indeed associated with non- (or infrequent) participation, someone who observes but remains passive (Edelmann 2013: 645). However, Edelmann (2013: 646) argues that lurking is not that passive. Reading, browsing and listening are indeed pre-meditated acts, and to read before acting—to browse before engaging—should be regarded as positive and active according to her. Lurkers are often well informed, and the practice of lurking involves a complex set of behaviours, activities and rationales. Furthermore, since it has been argued that the Internet lowers the threshold for participation, we should perhaps not be so surprised that a big chunk of participation online is not that visible (Edelmann 2012).

There is some research on why users lurk. Nonnecke and Preece (2003) suggest that users lurk to satisfy personal and informational needs, and to increase

understanding of a topic (Preece et al. 2004). The style of interaction in some communities may also prevent some users from wanting to participate actively. Haythornthwaite (2009, referred to in Edelmann 2012) also suggests that lurking may be altruistic, that by not posting reduces complexities, confusion and information overload (see also Preece et al. 2004). Küçük (2010), studying online asynchronous discussions, concludes that lurkers lurk because (1) they feel no need to post, (2) they are not able to use the software, (3) they do not like the group dynamic, (4) they do not think they are helpful and (5) they feel they need to learn more about the group before participating.

The research on lurkers and lurking is centred on the lurkers themselves, their reasons and rationales. I have not yet come across any scholar that addresses the interrelationship between lurkers and active participants in any detail. Preece et al. (2004: 208) do compare posters and lurkers and conclude that while the demographic of lurkers and posters are similar (as well as their reasons for going online), posters are more positive towards their participation and the community in which they participate. Furthermore, in contrast to lurkers, posters have an expectation of reciprocity, and they are also more motivated by knowledge sharing than lurkers (Lai and Chen 2014). Posters are driven by personal career benefits while lurkers are rather motivated by collective and informational needs (Chee et al. 2015). Edelmann (2013: 646) does allude to lurkers as important for an online community, but does not elaborate on this importance in any detail. Hence there is a need to better understand the relationship between lurkers and so-called posters (active participants). This study thus contributes to research in the field of lurking.

## Lurkers as an Imagined Audience?

A theoretical concept that somewhat does address the relationship between active participants and lurkers is the imagined audience. Litt (2012: 330), in her review of the concept, defines it as a person's mental conceptualisation of the people with whom he or she is communicating. If understanding our existence as a constant performance (see Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998: 73), the performer/audience relationship becomes one of the most central. This underlines the role of the audience for the conception/construction of the self, which in turn influences behaviour. Fridlund found in 1991 that people smile more when they watch movies with friends or believe that friends are watching the same movie in a room next door.

Audiences are changing with digital media in tandem with wider social and cultural transformations (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998: 4). Digital media in particular decrease the amount of information we have about those we communicate with. At the same time, we know that the person we believe we are communicating with determines how we communicate (Marwick and Boyd 2010: 115; Litt 2012: 331). Digital communication platforms give users the opportunity to interact with large and diverse audiences they cannot be entirely sure of who they are. And

the less we know about with whom we are communicating, the more we need to rely on our imagination (Litt 2012: 331). We are thus becoming increasingly dependent on imagining audiences when using digital communication platforms. Brake (2012: 1062), for example, found that bloggers envisioned their readership as they would like them to be (in his case assuming the readers to be sympathetic). One could argue here that how active users imagine their audience is indicative of how they conceive of themselves and their believed importance. Indeed, socio-psychological characteristics of the active users themselves and the context in which the communication takes place are influential when imagining the audience. Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998: 100) actually connect narcissism to imagining audiences. The technological environment/infrastructure/platform affordances do matter as well (Brake 2012). The media platforms used are of importance in, for example, obscuring the audience and making room for imagination. Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998: 99, 106) do argue that media content provides repertoires of images and narratives out of which users (viewers) construct scripts of imagined lives, blurring the real with the fictional.

Here it is difficult to bypass Anderson's (2006) influential work on imagined communities. But where imagining communities in Anderson's work serves nationalistic purposes for creating groups belonging within large geographical areas, imagining audiences online rather serves the purpose for making participation meaningful. Furthermore, the audience on Quiser (as well as on other social media platforms for that matter) are not entirely imagined (as will be exemplified later in the chapter). But what the concept of an imagined audience does capture is that subjectivity and identity are important when constructing an audience. The imagined audience highlights the importance of the *Other* for the self (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998: 99). Indeed, imagination is a social practice (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998: 105) and in this sense lurkers become important for active participants when negotiating their political subjectivities, which in turn are important for their participation in the online cultural public sphere. A lurking audience—imagined or not—thus serves the purpose of making active posters' participation meaningful.

## A Fantasy

Thinking about subjectivity and imagination, the concept of fantasy comes to mind. A belief in having an audience of sympathetic lurkers sounds like a fantasy in a common-sensical understanding of the term. But lurkers can be real (visible), invisible as well as imagined. Therefore, I instead turn to a Lacan-inspired understanding of fantasy for analysing the role of lurkers for active participants. The fantasy at play would then be, not the audience of lurkers as such, but that you can actually persuade a majority to side with you on a political issue and thus reach consensus and political unity.



Before attending to this *fantasy of persuasion* in more detail, let us disentangle what Lacan-inspired researchers imply with the concept of fantasy. I am referring to Lacan-inspired research since Lacan—infamous for his lack of clear expression—did not publish anything himself (Stavrakakis 1999). Others around him transcribed his seminars, making it even harder to fully understand what he really meant (Akdogan 2012). Furthermore, I want to avoid entering into debates of how to read Lacan correctly (see Carpentier 2014).

When Lacan reintroduced psychoanalysis in France, fantasy was a core concept. Central in the concept are the *split*, *lack* and *enjoyment*. The individual is *split* from the source of *enjoyment* causing a *lack* in the individual (Akdogan 2012: 56). It has been stolen by an *Other*. The individual therefore *desires* (searches for) enjoyment. The *fantasy* is created in order to cope with the lack, and it becomes a promise of filling the lack and reaching enjoyment. But enjoyment is impossible to fully reach. Žizek (cited in Akdogan 2012: 57) exemplifies this by referring to the anti-Semite whose fantasy is a world without Jews. However, the anti-Semite needs Jews in order to continue being an anti-Semite.

Of interest here is how the concept has been used in studies of the political and political communication online. A good portion of political discourses focuses on the delivery of the “good life” or a “just society” (Glynos and Stavrikakis 2008: 261). The imaginary promise (fantasy) of a better future, recapturing lost/impossible enjoyment provides support for many political projects. This is most apparent in nationalist ideologies where the *Other* (the immigrant) has stolen the enjoyment (the national unity; see Glynos and Stavrikakis 2008: 262). This conflict dimension of fantasy can be applied to theories of political identification, notably in the perspective of *radical democracy* and *democratic pluralism* (see Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Mouffe 1993, 2005, who themselves were indeed inspired by Lacan, see also Carpentier 2011b). Indeed, the identity that the split gives rise to is central when applying Lacan to political analysis (Stavrakakis 1999). According to Mouffe (2005), it would be futile to seek to reconcile groups—stealing enjoyment from each other—in some sort of consensus. Consensus would furthermore overshadow difference and conflict, which, according to Laclau and Mouffe (1985), goes to the core of the political (hence, their theory of democratic pluralism). According to them, the political *should* be about bringing differences to the fore rather than reconciling them. If we connect this line of thinking to the concept of fantasy, the *split* (the separation between *us* and *them*) is pivotal both for the political identity to emerge (since no *us* can exist without a *them*) and preventing fullness of identity to ever be achieved (since erasing *them* also would imply erasing *us*).

More concrete applications of fantasy can be found in studies of online political communication. Akdogan (2012) discerns fantasies of ICTs and social change in her dissertation on digital political fantasies in Istanbul. She concludes that politicians, activists and citizens all create fantasies of political and technological power, how ICTs can make politics more efficient, democratic, empowering activists and engaging ordinary citizens, among other things. In his work, Carpentier (2014) underlines a fantasy of power equilibrium through *maximalist participation* in his

study of YouTube comments. According to him, this fantasy is also connected to fantasies of agency, freedom, homogeneity, unity and leadership. Carpentier (2011b) has also discussed the impossibility of full power in terms of fantasies of post-political (the desire for consensus), social makeability (the desire to structure the social) and universality (the desire of unity, political as well as socio-cultural).

What this turn to fantasies in studies of political communication implies is an attempt to understand, deepen and critically discuss the role of the subject and subjectivity in political theory (Glynos and Stavrikakis 2008: 257). Fantasies, while unobtainable, structure social practices, and thus have political implications (Glynos and Stavrikakis 2008: 258, see also Carpentier 2011b), not the least when users make sense of political issues (Akdogan 2012: 13). This underlines the applicability of the concept for studying meaning-making practices in political discussions, as I aim to do here. Therefore, I will apply the concept of fantasy analysing meaning-making practices in the online cultural public sphere of Qruiser, with the purpose of understanding the role of lurkers providing meaning to active participants' practices.

## The Fantasy of Persuasion

The main contribution of this chapter is the argument for—and outline of—a *fantasy of persuasion*. In other words, the fantasy at play in the Qruiser forum that would highlight the role of lurkers for active participants in their meaning-making practices is that you can actually persuade everyone to side with you on a political issue.

But what kind of *enjoyment* is it that persuaders want to achieve? I suggest that the impossible enjoyment strived for is unity, a society where “correct” political opinions will prevail. Many active participants, when asked on Qruiser why they engage in forum discussion threads, refer to an urge to make sure “correct” opinions are heard, or in the words of one interviewee: “I participate because of all the ignorance on the forum”. Another explains his participation with these words: “I stand up for knowledge, justice, to enlighten and show facts”, and he continues:

I have crushed the alcohol liberals quite forcibly, I believe, after a concentrated effort, because I have a lot of research to support my arguments, and I am quite well read on the topic.

It was almost as though participants talked about a duty to make sure correct views were heard and spread on the forum. In the interview excerpt below, the participant answers the question why he/she participates in the forum discussions:

I'm overall very tired of ignorance. And I become even more tired as an LGBT when Qruiser allows faceless trolls to sit here and spread racism and coarse lies. It feels a little bit like my duty to slap them on their wrists.

This suggests that the lost enjoyment that motivates these participants is a harmonious society where “correct” opinions prevail. The strive for this enjoyment

underlines the fantasy of persuasion, that political unity would be possible to achieve if only correct opinions/facts are made visible and able to spread in the forum. In this sense, the fantasy of persuasion is connected to Carpentier's (2011b) fantasies of universality and the post-political.

Here it becomes apparent that the participants believe they have privileged access to facts, to the truth (as I have discussed elsewhere; in Svensson 2015). Participants know the facts, and hence what the correct opinions are on an issue that should prevail in a society. These opinions are not up for discussion. It is not the participants themselves that should be persuaded (as would be argued if applying a more Habermasian explanation model to these political discussions). Rather than to discuss, active participants are motivated to share facts they have access to. One interviewee phrased it like this: "The thread had about 90% inaccurate information, so I started another thread to correct these lies".

According to Glynos and Stavrikakis (2008: 262), the credibility and salience of any object of identification relies on the ability of the fantasmatic narrative to provide a convincing explanation for the lack of total enjoyment. In the Quiser forum discussion, the explanation would be that not everyone knows the facts; therefore, participants have to share the facts, tell the truth and argue for the correct opinions. "Apparently no one has knowledge about the subject", as one poster phrased it when answering the question why he/she entered the discussion thread. Below are some other examples from the forum threads:

I'm so tired of everyone that yells loud when it comes to immigration and labels each and everyone a racist because they have opinions about how to spend society's resources. We know the fact that massive immigration claims enormous resources, and then all other areas gets nothing, for example, the elderly care, I get very angry!

How do you explain that the priority of the old and sick in favour of a massive immigration? For this is a fact.

I do not care so much of what you believe or not. Facts remain. Try it sometimes, it will take you to unimaginable heights.

This belief in a privileged access to facts becomes apparent on Quiser, probably because this community is not primarily geared towards politics. Here, users risk encountering other users with opposing political opinions as in the interview excerpt below:

The Left riff-raff is so numerous in these threads, and I think the Left has done so much harm. They believe themselves to represent those who are struggling, but they have nothing to offer in my opinion, more than others should do more. And I do not like people who want to appear as generous but refuse to acknowledge the costs.

But this could also be considered as an advantage—that you could reach others with your arguments across ideological boundaries, as the interviewee below expresses it:

Quiser is mostly used for sexual encounters. But you do not really look for sexual partners in the forum, or not so much. But this attracts people to Quiser and hence expands my readership across ideological boundaries.

In other words, the *split* is explicitly apparent in communities not geared towards politics compared to in issue communities where users gather because they share the same opinions (so-called filter bubbles; see Pariser 2011). It could be argued, though, that the split is implicitly apparent also in filter bubbles. Such bubbles could be understood in relation to *the lack* the split causes, as a way to cope with having lost the enjoyment of political unity. A filter bubble where everyone shares each other's views is an attempt to partially fulfil the enjoyment of political unity. However, not even these filter bubbles would be able to exist if not for the *Other* giving rise to an urge to gather against those who threaten the spread of facts. Indeed, the *us* needs an *Other* to be strong and vital. A politically harmonious society where everyone would share "correct" opinions would erase the political identity so important for the us-them distinction.

A society where there are no political dividing lines, where everyone is persuaded, is indeed impossible (a fantasy). In this sense, the lost enjoyment of a harmonious society where unity is based on "correct" opinions (facts) can be connected to theories of deliberation and consensus (Dryzek 2000). The fantasy of persuasion and its lost enjoyment of political unity resonate with ideals of deliberative democracy where conflicts should be dealt with in a civilized manner in communicatively rational argumentation, and consensus should be strived for (Habermas 1996). However, understanding consensus as a lost enjoyment (rather than a norm to strive for, as is the case in theories in deliberative democracy) underlines the impossibility of overcoming political conflicts since, according to Lacan, fantasies can only be partially fulfilled. This then taps into the criticism of deliberation by radical democrats who argue that deliberation towards unity tends to overshadow differences and conflicts in a false air of agreement, unity and consensus, concealing relations of power as a result (see Mouffe 1993, 2005). The *radical* in radical democracy indeed refers to the emphasis of expressions of difference, underlining conflict and dissent as pivotal in a democracy.

In other words, a focus on persuasion as a fantasy veers away from normative claims of how an ideal democracy *should* function (as in a radical as well as deliberative democracy). Attending to fantasy as an analytical concept allows a deeper understanding of political subjectivities/identities and their actual role in political discussions. The concept of fantasy—through its focus on the split, the lack and the *Other*—places conflict at the heart of political participation, not as a normative standpoint, though (that conflict is the only way to bring political dividing lines to the fore and to hide them would be to hide power relations in society as in radical democracy), but as a way to understand subjective motivations to engage in political debates. Following this line of argument, to answer the question of why users participate in verbal battles with each other online, would be because they are driven by a fantasy of persuasion as a way to cope with the lack of enjoyment, of them being split from a harmonious world of political unity.

So who is the *Other* in the Quiser forum discussions? Us-them distinctions were largely constructed along two dividing lines (or polarising participation frames) of left versus right and islamophobes versus multiculturalists (see Svensson 2014,

2015). There are numerous examples of this in postings in the discussion threads. I have gathered some telling examples below:

After SvD's (*a broadsheet daily, authors remark*) disclosure of inflated jobs figures in polytechnics, leading conservative politicians refuse answer questions about the matter. The Right remains silent while caught red handed!

Soon filthy and bearded dudes in strange hats drinking cheap and crappy beer in a shabby city park will write to you and argue you should vote for the Left Party. Everything to get at the money that you earn so they themselves will not have to change their couch potato lifestyle.

I insist that some LGBT people, mainly to the Left, again and again defend or trivialize Muslim homophobia, they show a lack of self-respect.

All Muslim congregations have the same conservative policies as the Catholic Church when it comes to same-sex relations. If we cannot express this in a free debate (without pathetically being accused of being islamophobes), how shall we then be able to fix the problem?

In municipalities across the country the immigration has broken the budget. In Norrköping (town in the southeast of the country; authors remark) two elderly care units are closed down at the same time as 600 Somalis are on their way. We cannot afford to take care of our elderly, but free immigration we can afford? This is shameful!!!

These excerpts from the forum threads reveal that the *Other*, having stolen the enjoyment of a harmonious society with political unity, most often comes from the opposing side of the two dominant participation frames on Quiser. These opponents are concealing facts, preventing correct views from being spread, and hence they need to be—if not persuaded—at least challenged. This was also apparent in the interviews. “Narrow-minded and ignorant people . . . that is significant of people from the Left”, as one interviewee phrased it.

The radical democratic norm prescribes respecting the *Other* as an adversary and not as an enemy to be eliminated, something that is important for displaying the heterogeneity of conflictual forces constituting the political (Mouffe 2005). The fantasy of persuasion gives us some clue into why this adversarial stance is so difficult for the political subject. After all, the *Other* has stolen the enjoyment of political unity, and to respect the *Other* as an adversary thus becomes very difficult.

The *split*, which occurs when separated from enjoyment, shapes the subject according to Glynos and Stavrikakis (2008: 260). The fantasy is created in order to cope with the *lack* the split has given rise to, a promise of filling the lack, and thus, reaching enjoyment. However, as stated before, full enjoyment can never be reached. This insight also reverberated among the active participants in the Quiser forum. They knew that they could rarely convince their opponents, exemplified in the interview excerpt below:

You do not win over XX! It is about making more people revealing the big gaps in his argumentation.

On Quiser, active participants were generally aware of the fact that they could not persuade other active participants. Hence, they were constantly reminded that the enjoyment could only be partially fulfilled. To state, “You do not win over XX”,

becomes an acknowledgement of the unobtainable enjoyment. The question thus arises what kept the *desire* alive? Who did the active participant seek to persuade then if not other active participants? An interviewee answers this question in the following way:

Those who still can be influenced, to answer your question: “who do you want to demonstrate the shortcomings of XXs argument?”. There are no specific people. I think it is difficult to convince others, but you can show that there are alternative ways of looking at things and you have at least given those not yet determined a choice.

It is here that the lurkers enter into the argument. Lurkers are important for active participants because they are the ones believed to be possible to persuade. Remember that according to the norm of the forum, you do not participate unless you have a solid opinion formed. Lurkers may indeed be persuaded because they have not yet formed their opinion. Constructing an audience of lurkers is then a way to cope with the unobtainable enjoyment stolen by the *Other* on the opposing end of the participation frame. Enjoyment is partially reached when active participants believe they actually are persuading someone with their arguments and privileged access to facts. I asked participants how they viewed their audiences. Below are two answers from two different participants:

How do I imagine the audience that reads my posts in threads and as I reach out to? As very mixed. I have no definite idea about it more than it can be said to consist of two parts: a smaller part consisting of those who both write and read, and a larger part who almost only reads.

I view my audience as a more active part of the LGBT community, supplemented with some sympathising heterosexual people. Most of them are sympathetic.

Glynos and Stavrikakis (2008: 260–261) argue that the idea of the subject as lack cannot be separated from the subject’s attempts to cover over this lack at the level of representation by affirming its positive (symbolic imaginary) identity or through continuous identification acts aiming to re-institute an identity. In other words, active participants’ political identities (subjectivities) are linked not only to the stolen lack of enjoyment, but also to attempts to eliminate this lack. I suggest that constructing an audience of lurkers is such an elimination attempt. Furthermore, without experiences of partial success in obtaining enjoyment, the fantasy would gradually vanish (Glynos and Stavrikakis 2008: 262). Indeed, lurkers play a pivotal role for keeping the fantasy alive, and this sense becomes a driving force political participation (see also Carpentier 2011b: 119). Sometimes lurkers make themselves visible for the active participants. They are not entirely imagined, as hinted in the interview excerpts below:

I draw that conclusion because I occasionally get feedback, mostly positive, from members whose nickname I do not recognize from the discussion forum.

The positive feedback usually involves that they think it is good that I stand up against the Left on QX, the negative feedback that I only think about myself.

With success, I mean mainly debates that I have “won”, according to myself. But I also think of all the support I have received from others

These signs of agreement, support and likes from the lurking audience are of importance for active participants, to feed the fantasy and also to motivate participants to continue being active in the forum discussion threads. The opposite would lead them to question their participation, as in the excerpts below:

I will probably not be writing anymore in the forum here, because it falls on deaf ears. It is not worth the time you spend.

I have grown tired of the forum here. But otherwise, I feel that I am contributing with objectivity that I often see missing here. Whoever reads and how they interpret it, I know not. But hope that those who read what I have written, get the impression that I speak from my heart.

The function of the *Other* is thus a bit more complicated than just an antagonist on the other side of a polarising participation frame. It is indeed someone who has stolen the enjoyment, and they can hardly be persuaded. But at the same time, they provide an opportunity to impress undecided lurkers with their arguments and access to facts. They also give rise to the partial enjoyment of debating. Elsewhere I have discussed participation as a pastime (see Svensson 2015). This could be connected to what Glynos and Stavrikakis (2008: 261) discuss as desire sustained being linked to an enjoyment of the body. To pass time fighting each other could actually be enjoyable, or in the words of participants themselves: “To discuss is a way to compete, a hobby”; “Everything that entertains me is a good thing”. Here, it seems that participants enjoyed passing their time by verbally fighting with clear-cut enemies that had their opinions already formed. Knowing they could not persuade their opponents, they seemed to rejoice in attacking each other, as in this posting:

“XX, my dear friend (early on the bottle today?), you are as always barking up the wrong tree, and I am going to tell you why”.

The opponent’s role is thus complex. It is a thief of enjoyment, a constant reminder of the lack, and at the same time a vehicle for partial enjoyment—both in terms of making debate possible (and thus possible to persuade lurkers) and the “bodily” enjoyment of the debate/pastime itself.

## Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, I have zoomed in on this relationship between active participants and lurkers in order to understand the role of lurkers for active participants when making their participation meaningful in the conflictual political discussions on the Quiser forum. Active participants did not expect to convince or reason with their opponents; they were addressing someone else, an audience of undecided lurkers. Active participants engaged in conflictual debates on Quiser because they had access to facts and the truth, a duty to share, because it was fun, a pastime. At the same time they might convince some lurkers to adopt correct views and thus reach

partial enjoyment of a politically harmonious society where “correct” opinions would prevail.

The desire is structured around this quest for the lost enjoyment (Glynos and Stavrikakis 2008: 261). Debating opponents is a sign of this desire. However, full enjoyment cannot be reached. If everyone is persuaded, the pastime disappears, the game cannot be ongoing, and their identity as persuasive is not fulfilled. Hence, active participants simultaneously desire the object (to persuade) and fear the impossibility of fulfilling this desire (see Carpentier 2014). A society where everyone has the same opinion is a society with no politics.

Here, the media plays an important role in informing this genre of debate structured around conflict as a means to create drama and thus attract audiences. Political identities as well as mediated debates are dependent on positioning each other along lines of *us* and *them*. Still, the fantasy to persuade one’s opponents is a crucial driving force for participants discussing politics.

This underlines the importance of this fantasy, not only for political discussions in the online cultural public sphere of Qruiser. The fantasy of persuasion is at play in all kinds of debates, underlining persuasion as a motive—a rationale for political participation in general (see also Chee et al. 2015: 779).

In active participants’ identity negotiation as politically interested individuals, lurkers are of pivotal importance to keep the fantasy of persuasion alive—that they actually may convince—to keep their political participation ongoing. If we believe that political discussions are valuable in themselves, as a way to highlight dividing lines in a society (as radical democrats suggest) and as a way to deal with conflicts (rather than armed conflict), then we also have to consider the democratic role of lurkers and lurking. We need to reconsider lurkers as a reason for engaging in political discussions.

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# Chapter 13

## Environmental Talk in the Chinese Green Public Sphere: A Comparative Analysis of Daily Green-Speak Across Three Chinese Online Forums

Yu Sun, Todd Graham, and Marcel Broersma

### Introduction

This chapter empirically explores how Chinese citizens engage in environmental politics in online discussion forums. Most of the current scholarship about the Chinese green public sphere focuses on specific environmental events or movements with ENGOs as the central public, while everyday talk about environmental issues by everyday citizens (general publics) is underexplored in the context of China. Therefore, this study investigates online environmental talk by ordinary Chinese citizens, outside elite circles, in what has been labeled as the “green public sphere” (Yang and Calhoun 2007, p. 212). By means of a comparative case study, Chinese citizens’ everyday talk about environmental issues on three distinct online forums are analyzed, attempting to understand how different forums (from explicitly political to nonpolitical ones) influence citizens’ daily online green-speak and the opportunities they offer for new forms of civic engagement to change and cope with the deteriorating environmental situation.

The public sphere is a discursive space where private people gather together to debate issues of public concern, and public opinion is formed (Habermas 1989). In response to the Habermasian concept of a public realm grounded in the ideals of open, egalitarian, and rational-critical debate, which grew with the rise of modernity in European countries, it is argued that a public sphere has never been fostered in Chinese history (Brown 2014). However, this doesn’t mean that the concept of

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the public sphere is not important for Chinese society. In the Chinese context, the public sphere is similarly, but more broadly, conceptualized as “a space for public discourse and communication” (Yang and Calhoun 2007, p. 4), which could be critically assessed based on Habermas’s normative ideals to empirically capture and reflect the changing aspects of state-society relations and politics in transitional China. In the environmental arena, together with the burgeoning environmental movement in China, a “green public sphere” has emerged (Yang and Calhoun 2007, p. 2). This refers to a space where different publics gather to articulate environmental issues, produce and consume green discourses, and rely on media for dissemination.

Environmental movements mushroomed in the 1990s, and, at the same time, the Internet started to develop in China. The coevolution of the Internet and environmentalism has attracted scholarly attention on how the Internet was used by environmental groups or ENGOs to contribute to a green Internet culture and social change (Yang 2003a, b; Sima 2011; Liu 2011). As is shown in previous empirical studies, the Internet has facilitated the growth of a counter-public sphere which fosters green-speak as a counterweight against the discourse of rapid economic development (Yang and Calhoun 2007; Sima 2011).

In the past years, the environmental crisis in China has reached an alarming level, signaled by severe air pollution across the country. The environmental problems have not only caused public health issues, economic loss, and social unrest but also challenged Chinese leadership in terms of environmental governance. Environmental pollution is not only discussed online, but has also become a major force driving people to protest on streets. By the end of 2016, the number of internet users has reached 731 million in China, more than half of Chinese population. The Internet has become an important tool for ordinary Chinese people to seek information and produce public discourse (Zheng and Wu 2005). In the context of the environmental crisis and environmental governance, how the Internet is used by Chinese citizens to informally engage in environmental politics is a pressing research question because institutional mechanisms for citizens to formally participate in environmental issues are still inadequate in China (Grano and Zhang 2016). This study attempts to address this question by exploring the way everyday citizens talk about environmental issues online and how this is intertwined with aspects and practices of everyday life. It offers, at the microlevel, a glimpse into the processes of cultural reproduction, social integration, and socialization (Habermas 1987: 138–139).

## Chinese Internet and the Public Sphere in China

The liberating potential of the Chinese Internet, which can possibly facilitate social actors to form a civil society online, has been the topic of much debate (Yang 2003a, b; Zheng and Wu 2005; Yang 2009; Jiang 2010; Lewis 2013). Zheng and Wu (2005), for example, argue that “Internet use by the mass public, civil society, the economy, and the international community” will foster a democratic

transformation in China (p. 510). Similarly, Yang (2009) suggests that a “participatory and contentious” Chinese cyber culture has emerged with the widespread use of the Internet, even under the government’s political control (p. 2). He argues that in the context of this cyberspace, various creative forms of online activism have developed through which netizens are empowered to watch, discuss, and mock political power. They occur in an interactive dynamic between ICTs and non-technological factors embedded in Chinese culture, society, and politics (Yang 2009). Moreover, citizen journalists can nowadays use phones to record public events on video and then post the footage online, sometimes even working together with traditional media to overcome content control from the party (Xin 2010). Under the censorship system, not every piece of information can be controlled and is controlled. According to a study by King et al. (2013), critique of policy, political leaders, and the Chinese government is not strictly censored; heavy censorship is primarily geared towards content that aims to mobilize citizens for collective action, no matter whether they are supporting or opposing the party-state.

The Chinese Internet is characterized as “a more pluralistic public sphere” because of a variety of critical voices expressed by participants (Lewis 2013, p. 22). He (2000) suggests that “a private discourse universe” exists in China which is made up of informal conversation within personal networks outside the formal public arenas such as official meetings, mass media, and public forum. In this informal discursive space, individuals can express their opinions, which might be competing with the dominant official discourses in formal settings. With the rise of ICTs, the private discourse universe has been extended on the Internet as citizens go online or use text messages on their phones to discuss moral controversies and express deviant ideas, thus challenging the hegemony of dominant discourse (He 2008). Furthermore, powerless groups are enabled to counter the power hierarchy in Chinese society by expressing their personal emotions about private issues online, addressing these private issues into public through the evolution of collective sentiments (Tong 2015).

In spite of the Internet’s potential to strengthen civil society in China, some scholars still doubt if the Internet has a real political impact in China as the Chinese government continuously adopts new strategies to deal with the changing Internet ecology and to direct public opinion (Kalathil and Boas 2003; Morozov 2011; Sullivan 2014). When online activities evolve, a series of control measures are employed by the state to maintain a “harmonious” Internet, damaging the nascent public sphere, such as computer filtering which is not only a mean of content control but also results in self-censorship (Kalathil and Boas 2003). In addition, new censorship tactics are invented to shape online opinion in favor of the government, like hiring a “water army” (amateur online commentators) to intervene in public discussions (Morozov 2011).

Despite various surveillance tactics, it is increasingly challenging for the government to control all online activities and opposing views, the growth of the number of netizens, and popular forms of participation. Now the majority of the Chinese population has access to the Internet, small-scale public participation becomes common. *Wangluo weiguan* (网络围观), translated as a “surrounding

gaze online” (Hu 2011), enables Chinese citizens to discuss and disseminate political issues at microlevels in their daily use of the Internet. Thus, their minimal expressions of preferences and wishes are uttered and accumulate into public opinion. Recognizing the complex dynamics between open networks and closed regimes in transitional countries, Kalathil and Boas (2003) suggest it is necessary to further explore whether the Internet will open up these closed regimes and if this changes the socio-political and socio-cultural realities as well as individuals’ everyday life.

## Everyday Political Talk as an Agent of Change in Digital Age in China

To grasp the complexity of Chinese Internet culture in the grey areas beyond familiar dichotomies between state and citizens, and the political and the nonpolitical, scholars argue that it is crucial to conduct in-depth analysis of users’ online activities in relation to their everyday life realities (Yang 2014, 2015; Marolt 2015; Wright et al. 2016). In the fragmented Chinese society with economic, regional, and cultural (lifestyle) divides (Damm 2007), individual citizens’ online activities and power struggles at microlevels rooted in their everyday life need to be studied to understand Chinese Internet and politics. Marolt (2015) point out that “little is known about the ways in which the ‘online’ and the ‘offline’ is related in everyday China” (p. 5). They affirm individuals’ agency of power developed in their everyday life experiences could tell more about why and how they act online, thus providing more empirical details to understand whether their participation will or will not bring changes to the Chinese society at large. To further explore the multidimensions of the Chinese Internet, Yang (2014) has developed an analytical approach called “deep Internet studies,” emphasizing the significance of users’ everyday online experiences, including apolitical activities, in interpreting political contestation in Chinese digital spaces. Outside the formal political realm, popular cultural practices in everyday life have a multitude of political implications. The playful and humorous expression of *e gao* (online spoofs), for example, unlike rational debates, enables participants to mock the powerful and foster a sense of grassroots community, creating a new way of being political (Meng 2011). Yu (2007a) therefore argues that “the seemingly apolitical media practices of the consumer masses turned out to be political in the end as they influence the way people think about politics, culture and society” (p. 424).

Everyday political talk refers to mundane and casual conversations, through which citizens discuss and negotiate “what the public ought to discuss” outside of the state (Mansbridge 1999, p. 215). People talk about politics everyday not aiming for any particular goals, merely for the talk itself. By talking about an issue regularly in daily life, ordinary citizens ultimately obtain opportunities to draw

public attention to it. In this sense, the activity of talking becomes political in itself because it brings issues worthy of discussion to the public realm. Citizens negotiate matters of concern with others at the micro level to understand what the issue is, how it might influence their life, and what changes they want to have in relation to the issue.

Everyday political talk in the informal public sphere plays an important role in the “deliberative system” (Mansbridge 1999, p. 211). As Kim and Kim (2008) conclude, “everyday political talk itself might not be ideally deliberative nor reasonable, but it is perhaps the only practical way through which citizens construct and reveal their identities, understand others, produce rules and resources for deliberation, enhance their opinions, transform the domestic spheres into the public sphere, and bridge their private lives to the political world” (p. 66).

These new ways of being political may be even more important in the context of China. Unlike Western countries where public participation is institutionalized in civic organizations, political participation for grassroots publics in China is unorganized and not institutionalized. Because political events organized by citizens themselves are often oppressed in China, Chinese citizens turn to the Internet to have a voice. In light of the lack of public participation offline, online political talk has more political implications in the context of China than in Western countries. Therefore, in current scholarship about Chinese Internet studies, “new media events” or “online events” (Qiu and Chan 2011), in which marginalized groups are empowered by digital media technologies as counter-publics to challenge the dominant discourse, have been amply examined. Political discussions in Chinese digital spaces are normally “episodic” (Yang 2006) and event-specific. However, to understand the nature of Chinese citizens’ online political conversations, we should extend the focus beyond event-centric issues to less subversive everyday life politics. As argued by Wright et al. (2016), such pre/proto-political talk in everyday life can be considered as a political action in and of itself in the context of Chinese society. Specifically, any issue, topic, or story having a link to society can be identified as political talk (Graham 2008). Recognizing the crucial role of informal political conversations in the public sphere and the complex Chinese context, we argue everyday political talk is of great significance as an agent of change for Chinese society in the digital age.

## **Political Talk About the Environment in the Chinese Green Sphere**

Rapid urbanization has not only created an economic boom in China but has also brought numerous environmental problems. In response, the Chinese government has reformed its environmental governance strategies, highlighting the importance of public participation. It provides a supportive political atmosphere for public participation in Chinese environmental politics. Moreover, citizens’ private

concern for a better living condition drives them to participate more in environmental issues even though most of them are not motivated by the ambition of democratic participation (Chen et al. 2015).

Being aware of the important role of the mass public in environmental justice and governance, the Chinese government proposed relevant laws and regulations, such as the Environmental Impact Assessment Law, to safeguard the publics' participatory rights in environmental policy-making in the past two decades, which laid the foundation for the public to claim for effective and direct ways to participate in environmental politics. Nevertheless, most of the laws are not implemented very well in reality due to the lack of detailed description about how to facilitate public participation and integrate public opinion in environmental policy-making (Chen et al. 2015). Furthermore, environmental participation is restricted by the top-down institutional structure in China, where the party-state is the main actor to make decisions. As a matter of fact, there are only limited channels for the public to voice their opinions in environmental policy-making.

A major force representing public interest in environmental politics are Environmental NGOs, which emerged in the 1990s following the booming environmentalism in the world. Yang (2005) argues ENGOS are active in leading the public in environmental participation and "open up channels (albeit limited) for citizens to participate directly in political processes" (p. 65). With the increasing participatory awareness, a "green public sphere" for citizens to debate and express different views has emerged in China (Yang and Calhoun 2007). In the green public sphere, social organizations and citizens are the publics producing and consuming green discourse (Yang and Calhoun 2007).

Albeit with the growth of the green discourses, there are limitations to the green public sphere in China. Eberhardt (2015) finds, in his case study, little discourse about climate change by Chinese ordinary citizens in the green public sphere. Most of the green discourse is produced by and constrained within government and elites such as experts, corporations, and ENGOS. Similarly, Sima (2011) argues that the discursive space about environmental issues fails to involve the general publics in everyday life, beyond ENGOS, activists, university intellectuals, and education sectors. Apparently, the green public sphere in China is not citizen-centric. At present, the dilemma of directly and effectively engaging ordinary citizens in debates on environmental issues and policies in the green public sphere still exists in China.

Being popular among a large population in China, the Internet may serve as a direct channel for ordinary citizens to express environmental concerns. In the current green public sphere, environmentalists are very aware of the Internet's power and have been using it to engage the public in the articulation and dissemination of green-speak, expanding the public sphere in relation to environmental problems (Sima 2011). Considering the limited opportunities for individual citizens affected by environmental issues to articulate their concerns and produce their own discourse, this chapter looks into the potentials of Internet use to effectively and directly engage the general public in Chinese environmental politics.



Environmental politics is embedded in multiple aspects of everyday life, such as water use, health, waste, energy consumption, air pollution, and other environmental impacts to daily life. These environmental issues have attracted a lot of public attention from the new middle class in urban China. Compared to other citizens, this relatively well-educated group has more awareness of public issues and is more concerned about the political system in China (Linde and Ekman 2003). In the setting of everyday life, citizens' claim for environmental rights, mostly, are not directly challenging the political regime. They are first and foremost oriented to solutions for the environmental situation in China. Political talk online thus enables ordinary people to express their ideas about issues relevant to their private interest. Furthermore, continuous everyday political talk online "prepares citizens, the public sphere and the political system at large for political action" (Graham 2015). In order to see if everyday talk online effectively involves publics in Chinese environmental politics, this chapter first investigates the nature of everyday environmental talk in three online forums, and then explores how the daily green-speak made by ordinary citizens shapes the Chinese green public sphere.

## Methods

A comparative study of everyday political talk across three different Chinese online forums was conducted to better understand how ordinary Chinese citizens talk about environmental issues in different digital spaces. The three forums were selected based on their distinct features, ranging from an explicitly political forum, a mixed forum (which becomes clearer below) to a nonpolitical forum. Such an approach allows for a comparison of environmental talk between and across political, nonpolitical, and mixed forums, providing more insight into the nature of political talk in China.

**People.cn's *Qiangguo Luntan*** (meaning improve China) is hosted by the official online media branch of *People's Daily*, as a "central propaganda space" (Jiang 2010). It was established by *people.cn* on May 9, 1999, attempting to provide a space for nationalistic protest against NATO's bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Yugoslavia. In line with this tradition of patriotism and nationalistic spirit, the BBS forum was later called *Qiangguo Luntan* and became a platform where people talk about policy issues concerning the development of the country. Because it is affiliated to *people.cn*, this forum is perceived by Internet users as a public space of authoritative influence where they can expose social problems to high officials and push controversial issues into local authorities' policy agenda through higher-rank officials' attention and pressure (Wang 2011, p. 238). Considering all these features, the *Qiangguo Luntan* forum was selected as a political discussion forum.

**Baidu Tieba**, literally a "post bar" (similar to a BBS forum), was started in 2003 by the Chinese search engine company, *Baidu*. *Baidu Tieba* became popular among grassroots users because of its entertainment-orientation as a place where people discuss games, comics, and other playful/funny stuff. With its popularity among

grassroots, various non-mainstream subcultures and topics about societal issues emerge in this virtual space. In light of the entertaining and grassroots features of the forum, it was selected as a mixed forum. *Baidu* users can choose to join specific bars (sub-forums) in accordance with their interests and hobbies. This commercial forum is open and accessible to every individual. For marginalized or less privileged people, they enjoy equal opportunity to make their concerns visible, regardless of their social status in reality. However, *Baidu Tieba* is not an independent space. Users' practices on the platform are both shaped by the state, commercial force and the state-corporation dynamics.

**Yaolan.com** is a nonpolitical forum, focusing on childcare and parenting in China. As embodied by its name "Yaolan," which means cradle in Chinese, the website was established in 1999 to help parents deal with problems in different stages of parenthood. It covers topics related to pregnancy, health and nutrition, childcare and education. With access to digital media, young mothers often turn to *Yaolan* when they want to discuss issues concerning parenting and childcare. Although these issues tend to be private, they are likely to become issues of public policy as well. For instance, discussions about environmental policies sometimes are triggered by family stories shared by parents.

Identifying political talk in nonpolitical spaces, and environmental talk in political ones, is in some ways like looking for "needles in a haystack" (Graham 2008). To overcome this problem, we used keywords to identify green-speak, which can be found in Table 13.1. Based on this set of keywords, we identified threads where green-speak emerged and then proceeded to randomly take 25 threads per forum. For *bbs.people.cn*, the sample consisted of 584 postings. Discussions on this governmental forum often begin with topics of explicit political nature, such as environmental policies, environmental news, policy proposals from citizens themselves, and stories told by citizens to complain about a particular policy. The *Baidu Tieba* sample consisted of 846 postings. Everyday environmental talk on *Baidu Tieba* mixed conventional environmental politics with people's life experiences, such as how farmers in rural China deal with post-harvest crops-burning under environmental regulations, whether it's reasonable to constrain families to buy cars to control air pollution and what people should do when they discover emission of pollutants by industries in their living areas. The sample of environmental talk for the *Yaolan* forum consisted of 467 postings, covering a variety of topics such as air pollution, environmental education, low-carbon lifestyle, and so on. These environmental topics mostly originated from participants' private concerns in relation to environmental problems, for example, no fireworks for Spring Festival, protecting children from dangers of smog, and people's experience with vehicle restriction rules.

To comprehensively capture the participatory characteristics of Chinese citizens in political discourses about the environment, a multilayered qualitative and quantitative content analysis which allows us to examine civic engagement activities at the microlevel, was conducted. A three-level coding scheme was developed to thoroughly assess the nature and quality of online political talk, focusing on the deliberativeness of such talk, other non-deliberative speech acts, as well as the use

**Table 13.1** Keyword list for environmental talk

Keywords	English translation
雾霾/空气污染	Smog/air pollution
气候变化/全球变暖	Climate change/global warming
沙尘暴	Sand storm
节能减排	Energy conservation and pollution reduction
低碳环保	Low-carbon lifestyle
车辆限购/单双号限行	Curbing the purchase of vehicles for private use/ odd-even numbered car ban
Apec 蓝	Apec Blue
污染企业	Pollution industries
环保热线/举报电话	Hot-lines for environmental protection
生态环境/生态保护/环保	Ecological environment/ ecological protection/environmental protection
抗霾行动/抵制雾霾/对抗雾霾	Anti-smog movement/smog protest
绿色出行	Green travel
环保法	Environmental Protection Law
水污染	Water pollution

of emotions. The unit of analysis was an individual post, each of which was coded at all three levels.

Drawing on Habermas's theory of communicative action and the public sphere (1984, 1989), level one investigated the deliberativeness of political talk. Inspired by Graham's (2008, 2009) coding scheme, we assessed the communicative process and form of discursive exchanges: *rationality* and *continuity of debate*; dispositional requirements for achieving mutual understanding (*reciprocity* and *sincerity*); and the norms of debate (*discursive equality* and *discursive freedom*). Level two coding categories were developed inductively based on a pilot study. Moving beyond the normative framework of deliberation, this level focused on other communicative forms and speech acts, which include: *attention*, *complaining*, *questioning*, *storytelling*, and *advice giving/helping*. Level three examined the use of *emotions* by participants: anger, sadness, fear, and happiness. To test the consistency of the coding scheme, an inter-coder reliability test was conducted. Calculating using Scott's Pi, coefficients met appropriate acceptance levels ranging from .70 to .92 with *convergence*, *attention*, *curbing*, and *questionable sincerity* achieving perfect scores.

## Findings and Discussion

### *Level 1 Process of Deliberation*

The first normative condition under investigation was the level of *rationality*. As Table 13.2 shows, 28.8% of all *Qiangguo Luntan*'s postings were reason-based views (reasoned arguments) made by the forum participants. However, non-reasoned claims (aka assertions) were the most prevalent speech act, accounting for 47.8% of the sample. Users of this political forum often expressed their ideas or claims, but they did not back these with reasoning very frequently. On *Baidu Tieba*, 40% of the postings contained expressions of political opinions. Almost half of these were reason-based arguments. Although participants expressed opinions less frequently on *Baidu Tieba*, they were more likely to use reasoning to support their claims than *Qiangguo Luntan* participants. On *Yaolan*, the expression of opinions was not as prevalent as on the other two forums, accounting for only 17.3% of the postings. Moreover, using reasoning to support one's claim was the exception rather than the norm, accounting for merely around 16% of the postings expressing claims. Overall, participants of *Baidu Tieba* tended to use evidence to support their claims most frequently. It happens less frequently on *Qiangguo Luntan*, and rarely on *Yaolan*.

Our second indicator was *continuity*, which requires participants to engage in debate until mutual understanding is achieved. This was assessed in two ways, by measuring the level of extended debate and convergence. The level of extended debate refers to the frequency of continued interaction between participants via the use of arguments. We identified within threads so-called strong strings: a minimum of three comments engaged in the exchange of claims (argumentation). By calculating the number of postings involved in strong strings, the level of extended debate was measured. As Table 13.2 reveals, on the *Qiangguo Luntan*, 8.6% of the

**Table 13.2** Communicative forms across forums (%)

Communication form	Qiangguo Luntan ( <i>N</i> = 584)	BaiduTieba ( <i>N</i> = 846)	Yaolan ( <i>N</i> = 467)
Reasoned claims	28.8	20.9	2.8
Non-reasoned claims	47.8	19.3	14.6
Reciprocity (Replies)	25.5	40.8	68.3
Continued debate	8.6	10.2	1.7
Convergence	0.2	0.5	0
Degrading	4.1	7.9	0
Curbing	0	0.2	0
Questionable Sincerity	0	0	0
Metatalk	0	0.6	0

Note: The total percentages do not add up to 100 because the categories above are not mutually exclusive

postings were engaged in extended debates. In the example below, an extended debate emerged on whether air pollution controlling plans impact employment in China.

*Seed Post:*

出现“环保”摇摆，不是GDP受到了什么影响，也不是什么导致了多少人失业，最大的影响恐怕还是影响了地方政府的卖地利益，更影响了某些实权人物的黑色收入，因此，就把“GDP”和“就业”禁出来了，混淆视听，要挟上级，这种损招，本身就是一大污染！

*Comments:*

  环保必须和经济发展水平相适应，脱离经济发展水平，环保就是空中楼阁，如果我们回到耕种养殖年代，不要工业生产，人类排泄物都去肥田，当然没有环境污染问题，但是满足不了人们的需求，如果象目前西方发达国家一样主要依靠服务业而非工业赚钱，把工业生产让给发展中国家，当然污染问题也好解决，但是我国现在没有这样的技术管理水平 and 掌控世界经济活动的 ability！大工业生产污染是必然的，环保就是要把污染控制在一定的水平和一定的范围内，全国其他地区，不可能象北京一样，迁出污染企业，发展低污染的高科技产业和服务业。环保搞过度了影响经济发展，同样遏制了环保事业的发展。

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  :  
回复 企业治污的钱被当官的以各种方式拿走了，哪还有钱治污？所以乱排！所以不管！！！

07月13日

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  \*:  
zhengfuzhaoganshaqula

07月13日

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  :  
你在胡说八道，谬论不值得一致。

07月13日

English translation:

(Initial argument) *Seed post*: Some people disagree with the idea of environmental protection because this policy forbids local governments to get profits by selling land illegally, not really because it slows down the growth of GDP or leads to unemployment. . .

(Opposing Opinion) **User A**: It's necessary to take economic growth into account, when working out plans for the environmental protection. All the plans to prevent pollutions are created in vain, if it goes against economic development. . . Too much control to pollution impacts the economy, which, in turn, constrains environmental protection.

- (Degrading) **User B**: It's completely nonsense. It's not worth debating.
- (Rebuttal) **User C**: Why the government didn't control environmental pollution from the beginning! (Also an example of complaining and questioning)
- (Rebuttal) **User D (Reply to A)**: The money allocated to industries to reduce pollution are all corrupted by officials in various names... That's why industries discharge pollutants against regulations.

Among all the postings involved in such exchanges, 72% were reason-based arguments, indicating that extended debates were rational, critical, and reflexive. However, the low percentage of extended debate indicates that the level of

interaction between disagreements is very limited on this governmental forum. Regarding *convergence*, as Table 13.2 shows, a very small proportion of the sample, only one thread, achieved convergence, with a partial assent expressed by a participant. Given the lack of extended debates and convergence, the level of continuity on the *Qiangguo Luntan* forum was far from ideal.

On *Baidu Tieba*, 10.2% of the postings were involved in extended debates. Such exchanges were rational, critical, and reflexive; 81.4% of the postings involved contained reason-based arguments. In comparison to *Qiangguo Luntan*, exchanges of views were more likely to develop into extended debate on *Baidu Tieba*. That said, in both cases, the frequency of extended debate was low. In terms of convergence, such debates rarely led to agreement or compromise on *Baidu Tieba*, with only four postings coded as convergence. This is in line with the *Qiangguo Luntan* forum.

On *Yaolan*, very few discussions developed into extended debates and no postings were coded for convergence, which was due to the low level of argumentation and the expression of opinions. The *Yaolan* forum seems to be a space where people are more reluctant to express disagreements and debate with one another.

Next, we looked at the level of *reciprocity*, which requires participants to listen and respond to what others are saying. As Table 13.2 reveals, only 25.5% of the postings were coded as replies in the *Qiangguo Luntan*, implying interaction among participants was not very common and connections among them were not strong either. *Baidu Tieba* participants were more reciprocal with 40.8% of the sample coded as replies. It was in *Yaolan* where we saw a high level of reciprocity; 68.3% of postings were coded as replies, indicating *Yaolan* participants were very interactive and had a stronger desire to connect with others than in the other two forums. The results here indicate that the level of reciprocity was higher when the nature of platform was less political and more social. When people talk about environmental issues in a less political or more social space (closer to everyday life experience), they become more connected with each other, (potentially) fostering a sense of community.

The fourth indicator was *sincerity*. Sincerity was examined by identifying acts of questionable discursive behavior, gauging the level of perceived sincerity—whether participants doubt/challenge the truthfulness/sincerity of other participants. As Table 13.2 shows, the results were very positive for each forum, with no posts coded as questionable sincerity.

*Discursive equality*, our fifth indicator, requires participants to respect, recognize, and treat each other as equals. Thus, postings were coded for those instances when participants actively degraded each other—to lower in character, quality, esteem, or rank. Overall, the level of degrading was low across all three forums. In *Qiangguo Luntan*, degrading accounted for only 4.1% of the sample. The interesting thing is 18 of these 24 posts came from one thread. In that thread, it was argued that air quality in Shanghai was even worse in the days of Maoism than it is now, provoking a string of degrading exchanges among participants from opposing sides of the argument. As the examples illustrate, this behavior originates from the severe ideological divide between the two camps.

As Table 13.2 indicates, on *Baidu Tieba*, about 8% of postings contained degrading comments. Overall, degrading behavior was more common on this grassroots platform in comparison to the political forum. Unlike the governmental and grassroots forums, there were no degrading behaviors on *Yaolan*, suggesting that *Yaolan* participants respected each other. Indeed, based on our qualitative reading of the threads, participants tended to be friendly which in turn fostered a social atmosphere. People were encouraged to talk and join discussions on *Yaolan*. For instance, participants often replied: “thanks for joining the discussion.”

Our final indicator, *discursive freedom*, requires that participants are able to freely share information, arguments, and opinions in general. The results indicate no participants suppressed, restricted, or prohibit others to speak in the process of discussion on the *Qiangguo Luntan* and *Yaolan* forums. On *Baidu Tieba*, this accounted for only 2 postings. However, this only means that participants are not openly restricted by other participants to voice their opinions. On the outside it is unclear to what extent moderators are censoring the postings which are subject to content control on all three forums. Pre-moderation is applied on *Qiangguo Luntan* and *Yaolan*, and post-moderation is applied on *Baidu Tieba*.

## ***Level 2 Civic Behaviors***

To examine whether there are other civic behaviors emerging from everyday talk about environmental issues, we move on to non-deliberative acts. As Table 13.3 shows, complaining and questioning were popular on the *Qiangguo Luntan*, representing 21.1% and 8.0% of all postings, respectively. Complaining happens when participants express dissatisfaction about issues or events related to the environment. Questioning is a speech act used by citizens to directly criticize the authorities and pressure them to deal with environmental problems. As a prevalent communicative form, complaining did not exclude other communicative forms; instead it worked together with them to express users’ unhappiness about the current environmental situation in China. First, complaining was often mixed with reasoned arguments, which typically reflected participants’ deep thinking on environmental problems. For instance, in a thread about water use, a participant argued that it is good and effective to raise public awareness about saving water by charging the public for extra water use because Chinese citizens don’t want to spend more money on water use; but the user complained about the non-transparent financial management of the money the government collected and argued that the government should think about investing the money they collect from the public in improving the water quality to secure public health due to the severe water pollution. Second, complaining was used in combination with questioning the legitimacy of policies or calling for accountability of authorities. The joint speech act of complaining and questioning empowered Chinese citizens to foster a debate with officials and pressure them to respond to environmental issues.

**Table 13.3** Civic behaviors (via speech acts) across forums (%)

Civic behavior	Qiangguo Luntan (N = 584)	Baidu Tieba (N = 846)	Yaolan (N = 467)
Attention	0.2	0.4	0.4
Complaining	21.1	18.7	18.2
Questioning	8.0	3.8	1.1
Advice giving and help	1.0	4.3	12.2
Storytelling	0.5	3.3	23.3
Social talk	1.2	24.9	7.9

Note: The total percentages do not add up to 100 because the categories above are not mutually exclusive

In line with *Qiangguo Luntan*, complaining represented 18.7% of *Baidu Tieba*'s posts. Like above, complaints were frequently combined with reasoned arguments to criticize the governments' environmental policies. They did not represent the "populist voice," which Chinese authorities tend to use as a term to describe or devalue the meaning of complaints from grassroots Chinese citizens. Another type of speech act, questioning, also contributes to making public criticism about environmental injustice stronger. Less frequent than on *Qiangguo Luntan*, *Baidu Tieba* participants too monitored governments' environmental policies (or lack thereof) through questioning, which represented 3.8% of postings.

In addition to expressing criticism to the government, storytelling, providing advice/help, and social talk without political orientations occurred on *Baidu Tieba* as well. As Table 13.3 shows, participants were providing advice/help to each other in 4.3% of the sample. For instance, a participant felt puzzled about the accuracy of the city air quality index regarding the situation in far suburb rural areas with fewer industries; another participant helped him or her by explaining the situation and providing additional information. Through advice giving and helping, participants on *Baidu Tieba* could reach a deeper sense of trust for each other, contributing to a friendly atmosphere and a sense of community. Besides, storytelling accounted for 3.3% of the postings. In one thread, someone posted a photo of themselves in a sandstorm in Xinjiang Province (Northwest China). This was followed by more stories in which participants would compare the environment in their hometown (Beijing) with that in Xinjiang. Others showed sympathy towards people living in Beijing or felt sad for them. These communicative acts of storytelling not only enriched the discussion by providing more background information, but also created an environment conducive to bonding among participants.

Conversations on *Baidu Tieba* sometimes diverged from environmental issues. Most of the off-topic postings are intimate conversations which are too personal to have a political connotation, accounting for almost one-fourth of the sample. Intimate conversations happen more frequently on *Baidu Tieba* than on the other two platforms. For example, a participant posted his/her experience of cycling in a thread, calling for a low-carbon lifestyle. Participants subsequently engaged in



discussion in de-politicized and social ways such as warning them to cycle carefully and be safe or simply asking how much their bicycles cost. Although not explicitly political, these social conversations seemed to facilitate connections among participants, strengthening the community.

Similar to *Qiangguo Luntan* and *Baidu Tieba*, dissatisfaction about the rapidly deteriorating environment and environmental regulations in China was frequently expressed through the speech act of complaining on *Yaolan*. Complaining occurred in 18.2% of the sample. Critical questioning about corruption or government's policy also occurred, but less frequently, representing 1.1% of all postings. For example, in one thread participants were complaining about vehicle registrations via a lottery system and were questioning authorities as to why they implemented the vehicle registration policy to restrict ordinary Chinese citizens' right to buy cars and to curb traffic jams in Beijing.

Advice giving and helping was more frequent on *Yaolan* than the other two forums, representing 12.2% of the postings. Citizens provided advice and help to others on issues such as how to protect children from air pollution or how to save water in daily life, which was not only a way to practice their citizenship but also a way to form a sense of community among participants. As Table 13.3 indicates, storytelling too was much more prominent on *Yaolan* than on the other two forums, representing nearly a quarter of the sample. Much of this came in the form of replies, indicating that *Yaolan* participants were quite reciprocal when engaging in storytelling. As a way to make sense of the world, storytelling empowered citizens to form social connections with others. Moreover, as shown in discussions on *Yaolan*, the social connections formed in the process of sharing stories with others can be transferred into environmental associations established on the social basis of nonpolitical activities. For instance, a participant proposed the idea of establishing an environmental association for Moms after they shared stories about how to protect their children from environmental health risks. However, messages of this kind are often censored. Following this comment, participants stopped talking about this issue while several postings were censored by moderators. It is hard to say whether the censored postings were related to the issue of creating this environmental association or not, but postings about the formation of such associations/organizations are susceptible to censorship because they potentially provoke collective actions to fight against environmental pollution.

### ***Level 3 Expression of Sentiments***

In this section, sentimental elements were investigated to understand the affective dimension of the political talk about the environment across forums, attempting to explore the role of emotions in everyday environmental talk.

As Table 13.4 reveals, on the *Qiangguo Luntan*, 6% of the postings expressed some form of negative emotions including anger, fear, and sadness; anger was expressed most frequently. When we cross-tab emotions with the speech acts

**Table 13.4** Emotions expressed across forums (%)

Emotion	Qiangguo Luntan ( <i>N</i> = 584)	Baidu Tieba ( <i>N</i> = 846)	Yaolan ( <i>N</i> = 467)
Anger	3.1	12.4	3.2
Sadness	0.9	2.2	1.3
Fear	1.9	3.5	6.4
Happiness	0.2	0.2	0.4

Note: The total percentages do not add up to 100 because the categories above are not mutually exclusive

discussed above, we find that 65% of complaints were expressed via anger. Much of this was driven by public affairs such as government's ineffectiveness in dealing with environmental problems and the implementation of a certain policy. Furthermore, we found, based on qualitative analysis, satirical humor was used by participants and it, sometimes, prompted citizens to express negative emotions, like anger. The use of irony was popular among *Qiangguo Luntan* participants to ridicule government's performance when it comes to protecting the environment by seemingly expressing their praise for, and agreement with, the official discourse. The satirical expressions helped to draw public's attention to the issue and encouraged changes to deal with environmental problems.

Sentimental expressions were most prominent on *Baidu Tieba*, in comparison to the other two forums, representing 18.2% of the sample. Mostly, they were negative feelings such as anger, sadness, and fear. Emotions, typically anger, were often expressed when conveying one's opinion. Furthermore, we found anger was sometimes expressed when users degraded others or when users complained about some issues. Compared to *Qiangguo Luntan*, the expression of fear was slightly more frequent on *Baidu Tieba*, but still representing a very tiny proportion of the sample. *Baidu Tieba* participants expressed anger mostly in response to public matters such as environmental policies, which is similar to the governmental forum. When it came to fear, *Baidu Tieba* participants tended to be worried about environmental issues in relation to their private life. For example, a participant saw air quality warnings in her hometown; she expressed her feeling of panic. Such fears differed from those expressed by *Qiangguo Luntan* participants, which were more connected to the implementation of certain policies. Similar to *Qiangguo Luntan*, satirical humor was used when discussing the environment on *Baidu Tieba*. Witty language and sarcastic jokes were used to make fun of the bad environmental situation and criticize officials' corruption and the government's policies. Besides, satirical words sometimes triggered the expression of anger. In addition to political satire, participants used humor as a form of entertainment on *Baidu Tieba* by telling, e.g., jokes, which seemed to foster and maintain their sense of community and shared identity as grassroots publics.

On the *Yaolan* forum, emotions were expressed in 11.3% of the postings, less frequent than on the grassroots forum, *Baidu Tieba*, but more frequent than the political forum, *Qiangguo Luntan*. Unlike the grassroots and political forums, *Yaolan* participants expressed fear more than other emotions. Based on closer

examination, 18.8% of the sentiment of fear were expressed when participants were complaining about the deteriorating environment in China. For example, participant A commented: This is too horrific. The air people breathe is not clean anymore. Participant B replied: Alarming phenomenon! Will life disappear from earth someday? The second prominent emotion expressed on *Yaolan* was anger, 67% of which was expressed via complaining. The feelings of fear and anger were, mostly, triggered by their concerns about their own life impacted by environmental problems. *Yaolan* participants too expressed their feelings and attitudes towards the environmental issues via humor. Instead of criticizing the government, humor was used to make fun of the poor environment quality, creating a funny and friendly atmosphere, again connecting participants, fostering a sense of community.

## Conclusion

Everyday environmental talk online expands the green public sphere to the very grassroots level, in which average citizens are the main actors to produce green discourses, instead of the authorities, elites, corporations, and social organizations. With the rise of Internet use and the relatively loose political climate in reform time, ordinary Chinese citizens are provided with more freedom to voice their true opinions and passions about environmental issues in the public sphere. The green discourse produced by average citizens on the Internet shaped a type of environmentalism based on citizens' voice.

Based on the findings of this empirical study, everyday political talk about environmental issues in Chinese digital spaces does not necessarily lead to "deliberative" talk and mutual understanding among netizens, which is the "core" of the "public sphere." Rather, it gives rise to multiple forms of civic engagement and reveals a variety of grassroots forces from ordinary individuals in the everyday green public sphere. Citizens were active in voicing their opinions and showing their attitudes about environmental issues in China, although in-depth, critical-rational debates among netizens on the three forums were not frequent in this study. However, average citizens tended to engage in environmental politics through other civic ways in the green public sphere. For instance, Chinese citizens were involved in everyday political contention, challenging the authorities, through their daily expression of complaints and anger about environmental degradation and the government's ineffective environmental policies, especially on the *Qiangguo Luntan*. More frequently, citizens did not confront the state power directly, but rather they shared their everyday life stories and emotions on the environmental crisis with others, bonding people together. On *Baidu Tieba* and *Yaolan*, participants established relative freedom when they wanted to discuss issues that may be censored by forum moderators. These non-deliberative acts help to make personal issues into public issues, transform ordinary citizens into engaged publics, and fostering a sense of community among participants, as a new way of being political. The weak ties formed in these interpersonal exchanges

might generate new associational spaces expanding the networked green public sphere and allowing for greater individual agency by ordinary citizens. In the digital spaces, Chinese citizens showed their willingness and desire to participate in the policy-making process about environmental issues. Moreover, it opens up spaces for ordinary Chinese people to develop their everyday citizenship via mundane online practices of providing advice or help on what to do to improve the environmental situation within the realm of their private everyday life, which was quite common on the mixed and the nonpolitical forums.

The three forums clearly provide different contexts for daily political talk about environmental issues due to their diverging affordances. *Qiangguo Luntan*, the government-supported online forum, provides a political space where citizens interested in policy and politics can go to discuss environmental issues on a daily basis. As observed, citizens complained a lot about environmental policies and corruption involving authorities in the field of environmental protection and expressed their worries about the implementation of environmental policies by local governments, without directly challenging the central party-state. In this political space closely connected to the state, citizens enjoy the freedom to discuss and criticize environmental policies, and possibly influence policy interpretation and implementation. However, citizens do not have a chance to influence the process of environmental policy-making, because they cannot interact with policy-makers on this governmental forum. Therefore, *Qiangguo Luntan*, actually, helps the government to enhance their transparency, meanwhile opening up opportunities for everyday political talk about the environment, but it lacks channels for Chinese citizens to hold their government accountable.

*Yaolan*, a nonpolitical forum, offers Chinese citizens a private context to discuss environmental issues encountered in their everyday life. Mostly, political talk about environmental issues emerges when citizens discuss issues concerning their personal interests. In this nonpolitical space, private everyday talk about environmental issues is a mechanism for citizens to discuss concrete environmental problems and policies affecting their life. By doing so, these become public, and inspire citizens to think about what they can do themselves to improve the environment. Authorities are held accountable, but without provoking resistance against the regime. However, all the environmental issues citizens talked about were mainly what middle class citizens face within the urban setting, such as air quality in cities, green lifestyle, the purchase of car, and so on. The green discourse formed in this nonpolitical space remains exclusive to some extent, because it failed to address the issues lower-class people like rural residents and the disadvantaged in cities face in their daily life.

*Baidu Tieba*, a mixed forum, provides citizens both a public and private context to practice everyday political talk about environmental issues. In this overlapping space between the political and nonpolitical realm, ordinary citizens talked about environmental policy issues based on their life experiences and also discussed private issues concerning environmental problems. Participants not only criticized environmental policies which did not take their concerns into account but also revealed environmental problems they encountered in their personal life and made

them visible in the public via multiple civic behaviors. On this platform, everyday environmental talk is a mechanism to empower and vitalize bottom-up forces from ordinary citizens. Environmental talk, sometimes, developed into talk about flaws of the regime and calls for democratic change. In addition, this grassroots platform included the voice from lower-class residents, talking about water pollution, pollutant factories, and certain policies which affect people's life in county-level cities and rural regions.

Although the Internet opens up an everyday and continuous space for political discourse and civic expression on environmental issues in China, the everyday green public sphere is not independent. On the one hand, everyday environmental talk on the Internet is subject to surveillance strategies implied by the state to limit the power of the Internet in facilitating civic engagement in the Chinese green public sphere. For example, when citizens discuss forming an environmental protection association among individual parents, the relevant content was censored on *Yaolan*. On the other hand, commercial forces do not always play a helpful role in assisting the development of the everyday green public sphere in China. As found on the commercial forums, *Yaolan* and *Baidu Tieba*, some of the users who joined the discussions on environmental issues, actually, aimed to promote their products, such as air purifiers or healthy food, for private profits. Moreover, the commercial interests of the platforms sometimes cause submission to the state power to avoid conflicts with the government, at the cost of public values. For example, politically mobilizing content was very strictly controlled on the nonpolitical and commercial forum, *Yaolan*.

Despite the intervention of state and commercial power into the everyday green public sphere, we still can see the changes of state-society relations in the context of environmental crisis and governance in China. In digital spaces, general Chinese publics are very active in expressing their ideas, views, emotions, and proposing suggestions to avoid environmental degradation, be it political space or nonpolitical space. Their discussion about what should be considered and receive public attention in the green public sphere is not only a channel for the policy-makers to get feedback about public concern on environmental issues, but also a way for average citizens to build and practice their participatory capacity in environmental politics. We argue, in this chapter, everyday environmental talk online serves as an informal mechanism for ordinary citizens to directly participate in environmental politics in China. This informal mechanism also indicates a possible way to involve the mass publics in the politics of other social arenas as well.

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# Chapter 14

## Afterword: Clinton, Trump, and Artificial Intelligence

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*Managing Democracy in the Digital Age: Internet regulation, Social Media Use, and Online Civic Engagement* represents an important contribution to our understanding of how digital communication intersects with politics in democratic nation states. The chapters in this book perfectly illustrate how far this amalgamation has come since 1960, when J. C. R. Licklider outlined the idea of ‘cooperative interaction between men [sic] and electronic computers’ in his seminal paper entitled ‘Man–Computer Symbiosis’. Later articulated as a vision of an ‘Intergalactic Computer Network’, his ideas informed the development of the Advanced Research Projects Agency Network (ARPANET), precursor to today’s Internet. But far from restricting his thinking to scientific research or military communications, Licklider envisaged interconnected computers as having a central role in *all* parts of society. In his book treatise *Libraries of the Future*, Licklider professed that ‘telecomputation can be charged in large part to the handling of everyday business, industrial, government, and professional information, and perhaps also to news, entertainment, and education’ (1965, pp. 33–34).

The Internet has indeed come to penetrate all parts of public and private life, as Licklider predicted, precipitating a staggering growth in the free flow of communication and publicly available information. As the contributors to *Managing Democracy in the Digital Age* all highlight, there is a long scholarly tradition of researching the emancipatory and participatory potential of the Internet. Steeped with celebratory predictions of future potential alongside more sombre predictions about what *did* or *did not* happen. Indeed, early attempts at fusing democratic ideals with Internet discussion on a mass scale were marred in what Rheingold (1994) dubbed ‘the tragedy of the electronic commons’, where ‘too many people asserted their self-interest above the interest of the commons’. Blumler and Coleman (2001)

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meanwhile called for a ‘civic commons in cyberspace’ that would provide the structural framework to help capitalise on the ‘democratic potential of the new interactive media’. This they argue,

would involve the establishment of an entirely new kind of public agency, designed to forge fresh links between communication and politics and to connect the voice of the people more meaningfully to the daily activities of democratic institutions. (2001, p. 16)

Blumler and Coleman too highlighted the concern that any such agency or set of structures needed to stimulate increased participation, whilst also engendering a form of meaningful and intelligent debate as opposed to ‘mere “citizen playgrounds”’. Such predicaments exist, of course, even during the prime of the current second wave of digital participation. That is, an environment where digital interaction and interconnections have become normalised and routinised in our everyday lifeworlds. Where instantly and constantly available communications are redefining our social and private interactions, the potential for engendering new spaces to reconnect citizens with politics is re-emerging. This is especially pertinent in light of declining voter turnouts, lower interest in party politics, and deteriorating trust in politicians—arguably all functional indicators of representative democracies.

Positioning digital communications as a means to tackle political disenchantment is tempting. Though as Theiner, Schwanholz and Busch rightly argue in Chap. 5, ‘the sheer numbers cannot tell us whether more is truly better’. Engendering new participatory spaces must be done in ways that avoid creating yet more illusory spectacles of engagement. That is, emancipation for citizens to participate in democratic debate and influence the way in which their voices are rendered visible by their elected representatives. *Managing Democracy in the Digital Age* covers case studies ranging from the institutional macro-level analysis to bottom-up citizen-centred approaches from a range of countries, including the USA, the UK, China, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden. Inside and outside election campaigns, concerned with political systems (institutions and policy), and also issue politics (e.g. environment, LGBTQ, copyright, data protection, and censorship). It perfectly illustrates how digital communications have become an intrinsic part of governance and everyday civic life, much in the way that Licklider predicted.

Far from being simply emancipatory, however, digital communication inhibits a paradoxical tension where its utility is simultaneously a means of exerting control and a potential source of weakness. The Internet is in other words not merely a tool for digital *participation*, but increasingly a *space of contestation*. Nowhere has this been more apparent than the 2016 US Presidential Election, where Republican candidate Donald Trump emerged as the surprise victor after a hostile and unconventional campaign (see Lilleker et al. 2016). Internet use was viewed by many as facilitating a resurgence in ‘post-truth’ or ‘post-fact’ politics, the effect of which was further amplified by the so-called audience filter-bubbles. The suggestion being that far from engendering an idealised communicative space of competing ideas, in which rational dialogue would prevail, social networks exposed people to views that reinforced their existing beliefs—irrespective of their facticity.

Digital communication also implicated both the leading presidential candidates personally in a raft of negative publicity, with the competing sides vying for control over narratives concerning digital interactions. Democratic candidate, Hillary Clinton, was caught up in two separate email scandals. Firstly, the FBI's investigation into her use of a private email server from her time as Secretary of State during the first Obama administration. Such practice contravenes US federal record keeping requirements and gave rise to suspicions that Clinton had somehow attempted to evade public scrutiny. Frequently used against her during the democratic primaries, the investigation concluded in July 2016 with no charges being raised. FBI Director James B. Comey then caused ruptures when he announced a fresh investigation into Clinton's emails 11 days before polling day. Widely derided by democrats as an inappropriate interference in the electoral campaign, he defended the decision by stating that *not* announcing knowledge of potential new evidence would also have been a form of interference. Comey then announced—for a second time—that there would be no charges brought against Clinton a mere three days before polling day. Whilst it is impossible to gauge the impact of this late intervention on the election outcome, there is little doubt that it deflected media attention away from a flailing Trump and put Clinton on the back foot in the final straight.

Clinton's second obstacle stemmed from WikiLeaks' serial publication of leaked emails from her campaign manager, John Podesta. These contained a number of exchanges that proved embarrassing, including information about Clinton's paid Wall Street speeches; discussion about accepting foreign donations; international arms trade; and journalists sharing TV debate questions. Some of these revelations might seem like 'business as usual', the already understood operational dynamics of politics and its relationship with the media. However—as with the Manning and Snowden leaks before—the Podesta emails represented a unique insight into the secretive world of politics for ordinary people (the voters), who may view some of the revelations as ethically repugnant. Both email scandals reflect the inevitable computerisation of *elite* operational aspects of politics and governance. That is, the human-computer interactions exposed were designed to enhance private operational efficiency, rather than rousing some form of participatory democracy. Of course, the publication of these digital communications in effect also aided a form of public scrutiny and accountability of those involved—exposing the paradoxical nexus of human-computer interactions.

Resentment of the political and media clique was the exact anti-establishment sentiment that Donald Trump attempted to tap into with his campaign. Throughout the campaign, he adopted a demotic voice as a way of connecting with voters and distancing himself from the elite, typified by his bold campaign speeches and his personal Twitter account. This echoes a broader trend of privatisation and personalisation of politics, as described by Graham et al. in Chap. 8, fuelled by politicians' self-disclosures on social media. Trump's outside position, however, was reinforced when even prominent Republicans declared they would not support his candidacy. Despite this, Trump made a virtue of boasting about his business empire that made him epitomise the corporate elite ('that makes me smart' he retorted during the first TV debate when Clinton challenged him on failing to pay

income tax). Trump was widely derided for his prolific Twitter use, even during the official campaign, with tweets frequently containing eccentric and unpredictable outbursts. Such was the extent of his ramblings that *the New York Times* even created a list of ‘the 282 people, places and things Donald Trump has insulted on Twitter’—published as a double spread in the newspaper and as an online interactive graphic. Trump even took to Twitter to berate Alicia Machado, a former beauty pageant winner who accused him of racist and sexist remarks, at 02:30 in the morning. In one of the tweets he wrote: ‘Did Crooked Hillary help disgusting (check out sex tape and past) Alicia M become a US citizen so she could use her in debate?’. The attempted character assassination attracted as much derision for the time it was posted as the speculative content. Trump was also found to retweet people in the top-50 of White Nationalist influences (Kirkpatrick 2016), which helped fuel speculation about his affection for the alt-right movement. The unhinged nature of Trump’s tweets meant his aides reportedly ‘wrested away the Twitter account that he used to colourfully—and often counterproductively—savage his rivals’ in the final weeks of the campaign (Haberman et al., *New York Times*, 6 November 2016).

Where Clinton and Trump’s interactions signal the use of computers by humans, the 2016 campaign also saw the rise of computerised forms of self-communication in the form of bots. That is, an autonomous program posting messages and interacting with other users on a computer network. In so doing they have the capacity to manipulate and distort the popularity of one party or candidate over another. Kollanyi et al. (2016) found that bots were a major contributor to Twitter debate during the 2016 campaign, exaggerating the perceived support for Trump. Investigating what they term ‘computational propaganda’, Howard et al. identified a highly strategic use of automated bots throughout the election—including targeted scheduling of posts and colonising opponent’s hashtags. Bot contributions by volume favoured Trump over Clinton at a ratio of 4:1 during the first debate, which rose to 5:1 by Election Day. According to the team’s estimates, the top 100 automated accounts were generating some 500 tweets a day each—totalling close to 18% of all Twitter traffic relating to the Presidential Election (Kollanyi et al. 2016). In the context of digital governance, this appears to be a dramatic shift from the idealised notion of social networks as providing raw an unmediated access to voters and political dialogue, to a situation where the digital platform is not just a tool for communicative action, but a space of contestation and colonisation.

Licklider imagined a symbiosis between humans and computers, but the examples from the 2016 Presidential Election outlined above indicate a more paradoxical antibiosis. One which is propagated by humans’ desire to automate our existence and erase the boundary between us and machines. Licklider predicted that the symbiosis between machines and computers would be ‘a fairly long interim during which the main intellectual advances will be made by men and computers working in intimate association’ (Licklider 1960, p. 5). Artificial intelligence would eventually prevail, he acknowledged, by humans ‘conceding dominance in the distant future of cerebration to machines alone’ (Licklider 1960, p. 5). Perhaps, as even the

simple example of Twitter bots indicate, we are already seeing glimpses of such a future shift in ‘man-machine’ power-dynamics.

This year both Facebook (Tian and Zhu 2016) and Google (Silver et al. 2016)—companies famed for their personalisation algorithms—announced major breakthroughs in the development of artificial intelligence, specifically designed at mastering the ancient Chinese board game Go. Perceived as the holy-grail in machine learning given its size and complexity when evaluating board positions, it contains  $10^{700}$  possible scenarios versus  $10^{60}$  in chess. Google’s AlphaGo software achieved the unthinkable when it beat Lee Sedol, one of the world’s leading professional players, 4-1 in March 2016. Applying AI to Go is of course just the first step to applying artificial intelligence to a range of different scenarios—naturally personalisation of social networks and search engines for commercial gain, but also purportedly to tackle societal challenges such as disease, poverty, and climate change.

How does computer modelling of a board game relate to digital governance you might ask? Aletras et al. (2016) offered a glimpse of what cerebration of machines (to adapt Licklider’s phrase) might look like in relation to the European Court on Human Rights, after they developed an artificial intelligence engine to predict judicial decisions ‘using only the textual information extracted from relevant sections of ECtHR judgments’ (Aletras et al. 2016, p. 15). In short, the software assessed legal evidence and moral questions in 584 cases and in 79% of those reached the same verdict as the Court. Such developments are steeped in ethical issues of course and have profound implications for the future of digital governance and representative democracy. We are in other words on the cusp of a new era in computing, with plausible futures that we can scarcely imagine. In the not too distant future, human interaction with computers will be indistinguishable from human to human interaction—as indeed asserted by Alan Turing (1950) in his seminal work on machines’ ability to think. Communication between *individual* voters and *individual* politicians will be even more personalised than it is today, as described by Graham et al. in Chap. 8, but that personalisation will be provided by non-human intelligences. Whilst giving an impression of authenticity and closeness (or even direct or individualised democracy), this would further distance politicians from those they are meant to represent. Rather than listening and responding to citizens, machines can be designed to *individually* counteract arguments to persuade people of pre-defined policy positions. Worse still, if the ECtHR study is an early indicator of what could be normalised in future, the position of *human* legislative or political decision-makers could be undermined. In such a future, those automated Trump-bots that infiltrated Twitter during the 2016 US election will look positively primitive—and not just because of the political messages they were espousing.

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